

THE 90-DAY PROTOCOL · TRACK 1

Separation Survival Guide

Free sample chapter · Dexter Montgomery



Chapter 1: The Day It Becomes Real

An opening chapter from the original manuscript. The text is preserved with punctuation adjusted for this sample. Composite characters are illustrations, not testimonials.

Educational material, not therapy or legal advice. Consult qualified professionals for your circumstances. Safety, court orders, and professional advice take precedence over any general protocol. No book can promise reconciliation.

Chapter 1: The Day It Becomes Real

There are three ways this day arrives.

The first is the conversation. She sits you down, or catches you in the kitchen, or waits until the kids are asleep, and she says some version of the sentence: I want a separation. Maybe she says she needs space. Maybe she says she's done. The words vary. The impact does not.

The second is the paper. A process server at your office. An envelope on the counter. A certified letter you sign for without knowing what it is. You find out your marriage is ending the way you'd find out about a lawsuit, because that is exactly what it is.

The third is the discovery. You come home and the closet is half empty. Or you see the apartment listing in her browser history. Or a friend tells you something over a beer that he assumed you already knew. The decision was made weeks ago. You're just the last one briefed.

However it arrives, the next 72 hours matter more than any 72 hours of your marriage. Not because you can fix anything in three days. You can't, and trying is how men set fire to their own futures. These hours matter because this is when men make the mistakes that follow them into courtrooms, custody schedules, and bank statements.

The next seventy-two hours are for one job: not wrecking the house, the record, or the kids.

What Is Actually Happening to You

Right now your body is treating this like a physical attack, because as far as your nervous system is concerned, it is one.

The moment the threat registered, your system flooded with stress hormones. Heart rate up. Blood pulled toward the muscles. Digestion offline, which is why you can't eat. Sleep systems disrupted, which is why you're staring at the ceiling at 3 AM composing speeches. And here is the part that matters most: the parts of your brain responsible for long-term judgment, impulse control, and weighing consequences are operating at reduced capacity while the threat-response machinery runs the show.

You are, in the most literal sense, not thinking straight. There is no weakness in any of this. This is hardware doing its job. The same wiring that would serve you well if a man broke into your house at midnight is now pointed at a problem it cannot punch, outrun, or negotiate with, and it is going to keep firing anyway.

Understand what this means practically. Every idea that feels urgent right now, every speech you're rehearsing, every grand gesture forming in your head, every message you're tempted to send, is being generated by a brain in emergency mode. Emergency mode is

brilliant at surviving the next thirty seconds and catastrophic at managing the next thirty days.

So here is the first rule of the first 72 hours, and it is the foundation everything else in this book stands on: you do not make a single permanent decision while your body thinks it's being attacked.

Not about the house. Not about the kids. Not about money. Not about the marriage. Nothing.

The Instincts That Will Betray You

Your instincts right now sort into two categories, and both of them are wrong.

The first is pursuit. Fix it tonight. Sit her down and talk it through. Explain that she's making a mistake. Promise to change, list the changes, start the changes visibly and loudly. Send the long text. Call her mother. Show up with everything you should have said for the last five years compressed into one desperate monologue.

Every one of those moves feels like fighting for your marriage. None of them is. A decision like this was not made this week, whatever the calendar says about when you heard it. It was made over months or years, and it will not be reversed by seventy-two hours of intensity from a man in a panic. What pursuit actually accomplishes is simpler and uglier: it confirms things. It hands her, and potentially a court, a picture of a man who cannot regulate himself under pressure. If there are ugly words, raised voices, or a doorway she felt she couldn't walk through, that picture can acquire legal weight you will not be able to argue with later.

The second instinct is destruction. Rage. Punishment. Empty the accounts before she does. Throw her clothes on the lawn. Tell the kids what their mother is really like. Post something. Drink until the volume goes down.

I'm not going to pretend these impulses are shocking. A man who feels nothing when his family is coming apart is not stronger than you. He's just further from the truth of his situation. The impulses are normal. Acting on them is a different matter, because every destructive act in this window converts your pain into evidence. Evidence for a judge. Evidence for a custody evaluator. Evidence for every mutual friend deciding, right now, this week, which version of this story to believe.

Understand what pursuit and destruction have in common, because underneath they are the same move. Yesterday you lived in a known world. It had problems, but you knew its shape. Tonight that world is gone, and the panic you feel is not really about her. It is about the sudden, total loss of control over your own life. The urge to do something right now, anything, a speech, a gesture, a counterstrike, is not a plan. It is a control reflex firing in the dark. And the hard truth of your situation is this: you cannot control what she decides, what a court eventually orders, or which story your friends believe. The only control actually on

offer is over what you do in the next hour. The protocol below is how you take it.

Feel whatever you feel. Act on none of it. There will be a time and a place for every hard conversation ahead of you. It is not in the first 72 hours, and it is not while your hands are shaking.

The 72-Hour Stabilization Protocol

What follows is a protocol, not a suggestion. It is designed to be executable by a man who cannot currently think clearly, which is exactly why it exists. You do not need to believe in it. You need to run it.

1. If there is any part of you that feels like you're not going to make it through this, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, today. Not as a last resort. As a first-line tool. Everything else in this list assumes you're alive to run it. That one comes before all the others.
2. Say almost nothing. If she told you face to face, your response is short: "I hear you. I'm not going to respond to this tonight. We'll talk when I've had time to think." That's it. You are not agreeing, conceding, or counterattacking. You are declining to negotiate the rest of your life while your judgment is impaired. If papers were served, the same principle applies: you acknowledge nothing substantive to anyone until you've spoken with a lawyer.
3. Sign nothing and agree to nothing. Not a proposed schedule for the kids. Not who stays in the house. Not "we'll just split everything down the middle." Informal agreements made in the first days have a way of becoming the baseline for everything that follows, and you are in no condition to know what you're giving away. The sentence you need is: "I'm not agreeing to anything yet. I need time to think." Repeat as needed. It is not hostile.
4. Do not move out. Take space without surrendering ground. If you need to leave the house tonight to keep the peace, leave for the night. Go to a friend's, go to a hotel, go breathe. But leaving for an evening is different from moving out, and you need to understand that difference before you act. Packing your things and establishing yourself somewhere else can carry legal and practical consequences for custody and for the house that vary by state and by situation. Chapter 3 covers this decision in full. For now the rule is simple: cool off anywhere you like, but do not relocate your life in week one, and do not let anyone pressure you into it before you have legal advice.
5. Zero alcohol for 72 hours. Not one beer to take the edge off. Alcohol is a depressant landing on a nervous system already in crisis. It dissolves exactly the impulse control you're short on, and drunk is how the catastrophic text gets sent and the ugly scene gets made. If you cannot get through three days without drinking, that is real information about where you are.

6. Tell one person. Not your whole family. Not the group chat. Not social media, which stays silent about all of this indefinitely. Pick one man you trust, tell him what happened, and give him one job: "Don't let me do anything stupid for three days." You need a witness and a handbrake, not an audience. The broader announcement can wait weeks. Once information is out, you cannot recall it, and you have no idea yet what shape this is going to take.

7. Protect the machine. Eat protein even though you're not hungry. Drink water. Train hard once a day, and if you don't train, walk fast for an hour, because your body is loaded with stress chemistry that physical exertion helps burn off. Be in bed at a set time even if sleep won't come, and if it won't, get up, write down everything screaming in your head, and go back. The full physical protocol is Chapter 4. For now: food, water, sweat, bed. Every day. Non-negotiable.

8. Book the consult and write it down. A consultation with a family law attorney, this week. Not because you've decided anything. Because you need to know the actual terrain in your state before you make a single move on it, and because seeing a lawyer starts no wars. Getting advice before you move is plain competence, and you would call it exactly that in any other corner of your life. Then get a notebook or open a document and record what happened while it's fresh: what was said, when, who was present, in plain factual language without editorializing. You are not building a case against anyone. You are protecting yourself against the way memory warps under stress, hers and yours both. The full documentation habit is Chapter 8. It starts now.

That's the protocol. Eight items. A man in shock can run eight items.

DO THESE	DO NOT
1. Call or text 988 if you need it	1. The long text, barrage, or voicemail
2. Say almost nothing	2. Post anything, anywhere
3. Sign nothing. Agree to nothing.	3. Call her family or friends
4. Do not move out	4. Empty, move, or hide money
5. Zero alcohol for 72 hours	5. Drink and drive in the same day
6. Tell one trusted man	6. Tell the kids anything yet
7. Eat. Water. Train or walk. Bed.	7. Any permanent decision
8. Book the lawyer consult this week	8. Skip the lawyer consult this week

Eight items. A man in shock can run eight items.

Figure 1. The 72-Hour Protocol. Do these. Do not do those. Eight items.

Start the scorecard tonight. Four boxes: Body, Being, Balance, Business. Honest. Thirty seconds.

Body. You trained or moved hard, and you ate real food.

Being. Ten minutes with the notebook, no phone.

Balance. One real connection. On days without the kids, a call or a note. (No children: one real contact you initiate.)

Business. You showed up, functioned, made nothing worse.

The full template is Appendix C, taught in Chapter 4. Days 4 through 14, write tonight's scorecard.

One warning before you run it. Your brain is going to manufacture reasons to break it, and every one of them will arrive dressed as an emergency. The bill that has to be discussed tonight. The detail about the kids' schedule that cannot possibly wait until morning. The account question that needs an answer right now. Under this much stress, the mind generates false urgency the way a fever generates heat, and its purpose is always the same: to justify the contact, the confrontation, or the decision your discipline just denied it. So in the first 72 hours, treat every urgent-feeling reason to break protocol as guilty until proven innocent. Give it 24 hours. A real emergency involves somebody's safety or a hard legal deadline, and you will recognize one when it comes, because a real emergency does not need you to argue yourself into it.

What You Are Not Doing Yet

Notice everything the protocol does not include.

You are not deciding whether this marriage survives. You are not diagnosing what went wrong, whose fault it was, or when it started. You are not managing what she thinks or feels about anything. You are not telling the kids, which is a conversation important enough to get its own chapter and careful enough that doing it in a panic causes real damage. You are not retaining a war team tonight, dividing property, or planning the next six months.

All of that is coming. All of it is in this book. None of it is a 72-hour problem, and treating it like one is precisely how men lose ground they never get back.

There's a version of you, maybe weeks from now, maybe months, who will handle every one of those decisions with a clear head, sound advice, and his feet under him. Every hour you spend running this protocol instead of chasing your impulses is an hour spent building that man's position. Right now you cannot be wise. Fine. You can be disciplined, and in this window, discipline is worth more than wisdom anyway.

When You Feel Fine

Somewhere in the first days, possibly as early as tomorrow, you may notice something strange: you feel okay. You get through a workday. You laugh at something. Colleagues who know would never guess. A part of you concludes you're handling this better than expected, and right behind that thought comes a more dangerous one: maybe you don't need the protocol after all.

Do not trust it. Shock produces a numbness that impersonates coping, and it wears off on its own schedule, not yours. For a lot of men the bill comes due on the first weekend alone, when the house goes quiet, there is no workday to structure the hours, and the full size of what is happening finally gets through. That crash is not a setback, and it is not evidence that you're weak. It is the anesthesia wearing off. Grief after a separation does not move in a clean line from bad to better. It comes in waves, on a delay, often triggered by nothing you saw coming: a song, an empty chair on the other side of the table, reaching for your phone to send her something funny before you remember. The waves keep coming for a while. Over time they space out and lose force, but early on they hit hard, and the man who thought he was fine on Tuesday gets ambushed on Saturday.

So plan for it. Do not let your first solo weekend arrive as forty-eight empty hours. Load it: training, time with the one friend who knows, your kids if it is your weekend with them, work that uses your hands. Structure will not stop the wave, and stopping it is not the goal. The goal is that when it hits, you are somewhere solid, doing something real, instead of alone on a couch with a bottle and a phone.

The First Morning

At some point in the first 72 hours you will wake up, and for two or three seconds you won't remember. Then you will, and it will land on your chest with its full weight all over again.

That moment is going to keep happening for a while. I won't lie to you about that. But here is what you do with it, tomorrow morning and every morning after. First thing upon waking, get out of bed. Not after twenty minutes of staring at the ceiling. Out. Then get water in you, yes, even before coffee. Then move your body. A group workout class, a garage session, a thirty-minute walk at a pace that means it. That part is up to you. The next day, you repeat it, whether or not it feels like it's working, because it working is not something you'll be able to feel yet. It's something you'll see later, in the disasters that never happened.

You did not choose this day. Nobody consulted you. But the record of what you did in the seventy-two hours after it, that part is yours, and it may be the only part that is. Men have stood exactly where you're standing and turned this window into wreckage that followed them for years. You have heard those stories. Every man has: the cousin, the coworker, the friend of a friend who made the worst season of his life permanently worse in one bad week. Other men gave themselves three days of silence and discipline, and gave their future selves a fighting chance.

The seventy-two hours are just the beginning, but they set the stage for everything that follows. Set it right, and you start the next six months standing. Compound a bad situation, and you spend those months digging out of a hole you dug yourself, in the dark, with the whole world watching.

Days 4 Through 14

The initial protocol got you through the blast.

The freeze still holds. No permanent decision about the house, the kids, the money, or the marriage. No informal deal dressed as peace. If something feels urgent, it waits for morning and for counsel. Safety is the only exception, and safety is not a strategy question.

Day 4. Keep the eight items running. Confirm the lawyer consult is actually on a calendar this week, with a time and an address, not as a thought you had. Tell no new people. If you already told your one man, that is enough. Write tonight's scorecard. Eat. Train or walk hard. Phone on the charger in another room when you sleep.

Day 5. Start the document inventory. Copies, not originals, stored where only you can reach them. You do not need the whole list today. Tax returns, the last year of bank and card statements, the house papers, pay stubs, the kids' school and medical info. Appendix B is the full list. Today is the start.

Day 6. Sketch the wartime numbers on one page: what came in last month, housing costs, what a second home could cost, what you already owe. It will be ugly and incomplete. Incomplete is allowed. Do not move money in a panic. Do not empty accounts. Chapter 5 will teach the rules. Today you just want a rough snapshot of where things stand.

The first weekend, Days 7 and 8. Do not let forty-eight empty hours arrive as a surprise. Load them before Friday dinner: training, time with the one man who knows, your kids if it is your weekend, work that uses your hands. If the kids are with you, ordinary beats entertainment. Meals, bedtime, the park you already know. If they are not with you, you still load the hours. A first solo weekend with a bottle and a phone is how the first man starts his wreckage. You already planned for the wave in this chapter. Now you actually stand somewhere solid when it hits.

The first Monday, Day 9. Go to work. You do not owe the office your story. If your absence or your face will raise a question, your manager gets one factual sentence, not a confession: a family matter, you are handling it, you will flag dates that affect the calendar. Everyone else gets nothing. She is not discussed there. Performance this week is show up, function, make nothing worse. That is a professional standard, not a hero standard.

School and drop-off, if you have children and it is your morning: same time, same bag, same face. Do not tell them yet. That conversation waits until the change is real and near, and it gets planned with their mother if it can be, in Chapter 10. If they ask, you do not lie and you do not dump. "Mom and I are working some things out. You are safe. We both love you." Then you stop talking.

Days 10 through 12. Keep the inventory moving. Keep the consult. Keep the scorecard. Still no midnight move-out. Still no long text. Still no post. If housing pressure arrives, you do not

answer it after 9 PM and you do not answer it without the three questions in Chapter 3. If papers arrived, the response clock is real. Your lawyer, not a forum, owns the next move.

Days 13 and 14. First Sunday night of the new shape, whether the kids just left or never left. Plan the evening the way you planned the weekend: training, a call, work with your hands, the notebook. Review the two weeks in four lines: what you did not wreck, what is still leaking, the consult date, the one thing Tuesday must finish. Then you are allowed to turn the page.

The next chapter is not more calendar. It is the tour of exactly how the first man does the first two weeks, mistake by mistake, so you recognize every one of them the moment they come dressed as a good idea.

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