Ryan Deiss




# A SIMPLE SYSTEM THAT TURNS CHAOTIC COMPANIES INTO SCALABLE GROWTH MACHINES

# THE MILLION DOLLAR NAPKIN

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Ryan Deiss

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PAGE TWO
SIMPLIFIED

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*For Emily, who somehow always knew*
*when to push me forward and when to pull me home.*

Also by Ryan Deiss

*Get Scalable: The Operating System Your Business Needs to Run and Scale Without You*

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# Introduction

## Why I Wrote This Book (and Why I Wrote It the Way I Did)

**MOST BUSINESS** books are boring. They're bloated, academic, or—even worse—they're written by someone who hasn't run a real business in twenty years (if ever). That's not the book I wanted to write.

I wanted to write a book for business leaders who are in the trenches right now, juggling payroll, product launches, people problems, and the kind of stress that doesn't clock out at 5 p.m.

I wanted to write a book for people like me.

You don't need another 300 pages of theory. You need tools. You need clarity. And maybe (just maybe)

you need someone to tell you that it's not supposed to be this hard. That's why I wrote *The Million Dollar Napkin*.

The book has two parts. Part 1 is a fable: It tells the story of Chuck, a burned-out founder on the verge of shutting down his company, and a mysterious adviser, Harp, who helps him along the way. Now, full disclosure: Chuck isn't me and Harp isn't real. But the story? It's true.

It's true in the sense that every scene is inspired by real experiences from my own entrepreneurial journey—the wins, the losses, and the night my wife sat me down and told me I needed to remember what my priorities were supposed to be. But it's not just my story. It's yours, too.

Every business owner I've ever worked with (and there have been thousands) has their own version of Chuck's breaking point—the moment they realized that the thing they created, the thing that was supposed to give them freedom, had quietly become their prison. If that's you, keep reading. Chuck's story may be a fable, but it provides real, tactical solutions (and maybe a laugh or two at my expense).

Part 2 is the full playbook: a practical, step-by-step guide to installing the systems that can save your company. This section is zero fluff—just what to do, how to do it, and why it works.

At its core, this is a book about building a business that doesn't depend on you. Not a bigger business (although that's usually what happens) but a better one. A business that's scalable, sustainable, and *enjoyable* to own and operate.

So, whether you're staring down burnout, looking for leverage, or simply tired of being the bottleneck in your own business, you'll find more than just pep talks and platitudes here. I'm giving you the systems I've used in my own companies to scale without sacrifice.

Now, grab a napkin. We've got work to do.

RYAN

# PART ONE

# THE FABLE

# 1

# Livin' the Dream

CHUCK'S BAD week began on Tuesday at exactly 3:13 p.m., just thirteen minutes into what was supposed to be a routine weekly check-in with his VP of Sales, Bill Neely. Bill had been with Chuck at Beacon Solutions for years—loyal, old-school, a closer. He wasn't a systems guy, but he knew how to hit quota when given something to work with. Lately there wasn't much to work with.

"So," Chuck said. "What's the latest on the sales front?" Last month had been bad, and this month's sales report was looking even worse. Chuck needed to know if there was any hope of getting back on track.

"I can't close ghosts, Chuck," Bill said, arms folded across his zip-up vest. "Leads are down almost 50 percent. My team can't close what Marketing doesn't give us."

Chuck fixed his eyes on the report, hoping the numbers would smother the rising heat in his chest. Bill had always been blunt. Blunt, he could take. This was something different.

"Bill, you know as well as anyone that we can't spend as much on advertising and lead generation when sales are under budget. Plus, Kate's still dialing things in. She just needs more time."

Bill leaned forward, forearms braced on the table. "She's had six months, Chuck. My reps are sitting around cold while her Marketing people fiddle with taglines."

Chuck opened his mouth to reply, but Bill cut him off.

"Look, I'm just gonna say it. Marketing's not doing their job. My guys need leads. They need people to call. And all Kate's team can give me is more 'brand awareness.' I don't need awareness. I need prospects. Warm ones. Qualified."

Chuck's jaw tightened. "This isn't a new conversation, Bill."

"No, it isn't," Bill said. "Which is why I'm drawing a line. If she's in, then I'm out."

There it was. Not a warning. Not a suggestion. An ultimatum.

Chuck's mouth went dry. The last thing he needed was to lose his Head of Sales now.

"I hear you," Chuck said carefully. "Can we talk more tomorrow morning? I want to think about this . . . make a real plan."

Bill stared at him for a moment, then gave a single, slow nod. "Sure. Eight o'clock. But I'm not bluffing." And with that, he stood and walked out.

Chuck sat alone in the conference room, listening to the distant hum of phone chatter and message pings from down the hall. He looked at the time: 3:36 p.m.

*I need a drink.*

HARPER'S TAVERN looked exactly the same as it had when Chuck first walked into it ten years earlier. Same dusty awning. Same worn brass handle that always stuck just before it gave way. Same flickering neon sign:

HARPER'S TAVERN
EST. 1978

Chuck was a regular at Harper's back when he first started his business. He'd bring his team to the bar to celebrate when they had a good week, or commiserate

when they had a bad one. Back then the team was small, just Chuck and a few true believers. Back then, stress felt like *fuel*, not a boulder pressing on his chest. But back then he didn't have four kids waiting for him at home.

The bar was quiet. Just one other patron and a lone TV on mute. Chuck used to know all the bartenders by name, and they knew his. They knew his drink, too. It would be poured and waiting for him before he sat down.

But this bartender was new. An older man with silver hair and a welcoming smile. He looked up as Chuck took a seat.

"Can I see some ID?"

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "You serious?"

Chuck had always looked young for his age, but at thirty-eight he couldn't remember the last time he'd been carded.

"Nah, I'm just messing with you," the bartender said with a grin. "You looked like you could use a laugh. What'll it be?"

Chuck smirked. "Willett. Neat. Water on the side."

"Rough day?" the bartender asked as he poured.

Chuck took the drink in both hands. "Livin' the dream."

THE NEXT morning, Chuck arrived at the office early. He had a plan. Sort of. After a couple whiskeys and a few hours of sleep, he had convinced himself it would blow over.

*Bill's made threats like this before*, Chuck told himself. *He just needs to cool off*.

Bill was already waiting in his office when Chuck walked in.

"Morning," Bill said, still standing.

"Morning," Chuck replied. "I thought about what you said yesterday, and I'm not firing Kate. We just need another thirty days and I'm sure—"

Bill waved his hands, cutting him off. "Look, Chuck, I'm out. I've accepted an offer from Titan Cyber. I didn't want to do it, but I knew you'd kick the can."

"What?" Chuck froze. "You can't be serious."

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "I can't wait any longer. I have to make a move."

"Bill, not Titan! We hate Titan. We've been battling Titan for clients and talent for the last three years! You can't leave me for them!"

"Sorry, Chuck, I really am," Bill said again. "But they've got product, pipeline, and budget. And I want to work for a company that puts me in a position to win, not one that keeps making excuses for why we can't."

Chuck's stomach dropped. "You would have left even if I'd fired Kate, wouldn't you?"

Bill didn't answer. He didn't have to.

"Thanks for everything," Chuck said coldly. "Someone on Toni's team will be in touch about your final paycheck."

Bill nodded. "I appreciate it." Then he turned and walked out without a handshake.

Chuck needed to move fast before the news got out. He opened his laptop and fired off a quick message to Kate: "Can you swing by my office when you have a chance?"

"Sure, I actually needed to chat with you, too," Kate replied.

*Maybe this is a blessing in disguise*, Chuck told himself. *A chance to reset*. He took a breath and started doing the math.

He could step in as the interim VP of Sales, get into the weeds, see what was really going on. And the Senior Sales Manager, Joel, seemed sharp enough to handle the day-to-day. He had filled in for Bill a couple times already, so between the two of them they could keep things running. Even better, this would allow him to work directly with Kate. Give her the support she needed. Help her succeed.

"This can work," he said aloud. He didn't love the plan. But if he was going to sell it to the team, he had to sell it to himself first.

Chuck gathered the sales team in the bullpen and broke the news about Bill. No one looked surprised. A few nodded. One guy actually smirked.

"For now, I'll be stepping in as VP of Sales until we find his replacement," Chuck said, "and Joel will run the day-to-day as interim Head of Sales."

Joel looked like a man trying not to smile at a funeral—sad about Bill, but unable to hide the spark in his eyes. *Good*, Chuck thought to himself. *He'll need that fire.*

Chuck went back to his desk and had just sat down when the knock came.

"Perfect timing, Kate. Come on in."

Kate stepped in with a practiced half-smile.

"I wanted to give you a heads-up," Chuck said. "Bill's leaving."

Kate blinked. "Oh."

"Yeah. Effective immediately."

"I see."

Kate's tone caught Chuck by surprise. She and Bill had never been close. If anything, Chuck thought Kate would be relieved by the news. But she didn't look relieved. She just stood there.

Chuck broke the silence. "I think this is actually a good thing. For the company and for you. We'll get to work more closely together, and—"

Kate gave a tight smile. "Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a single sheet of neatly folded paper. Chuck stared at it.

"I've accepted another opportunity," she said. "It's closer to home and a better fit for where I want to grow."

Her voice was calm. Measured. Rehearsed.

"How long can you give me?" Chuck asked.

"That's just it," Kate said. "I need to start this new job immediately, so I'm sorry but today really needs to be my last day. I'll still be available via email and can help with any transition, and . . ."

Kate's rehearsed speech continued, but Chuck stopped listening—too dazed to think or speak.

"I really do appreciate this opportunity, and I wish you and everyone at Beacon the best of luck."

Kate held out her hand. Chuck shook it. Then she turned and left without looking back.

CHUCK SAT at his desk, staring at nothing.

Two VPs gone—a third of his leadership team vaporized in less than an hour. No sales lead. No marketing support. And to make matters worse, revenue was down and payroll was due next week.

He logged into his bank account. There was just enough cash to make it through the month.

*That should be enough, but what about next month? Thank God we have a line of credit.*

It wasn't much. Just enough to cover a month or two of payroll while he worked through this rough patch. He clicked the link to the line of credit account.

> This account is currently under review.
> Please contact your account manager.

Chuck stared at the screen and read the message again. Then he stood up, grabbed his keys, and walked out the door without saying a word to anyone.

As he sat in his car, Chuck tried to remember why he ever started this business in the first place. No one told him he should do it. In fact, everyone told him he was crazy. Everyone except Susan.

*So why did I do it?* he thought. No answer came.

He glanced up at his rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of his office. Inside, people were working like it was just another Wednesday—people whose paychecks were due next week.

And that's when the voice in his head finally said the words he'd been dreading: *This is it. I don't think I can save it this time.*

The next thing Chuck knew, he was driving. He didn't know where he was going—only that he couldn't stay there. *It'll be lunchtime soon. I can grab a bite to eat. Clear my head.*

The short drive turned into an hour. Then two. Then more, until eventually his car drifted toward a familiar exit.

Back at Harper's, the same bartender was wiping down the counter. Chuck sat down. The stool felt warmer than his office chair.

"Back so soon?" the bartender asked.

Chuck didn't answer.

His bourbon arrived without another word. He took a sip, and for the first time in his life, Chuck seriously considered shutting everything down.

2

# The Napkin

**3:47 p.m.**

Harper's was nearly empty. The lunch rush was over and the happy hour crowd hadn't yet arrived. It was just Chuck, the bartender, and a guy nursing a beer at the end of the bar.

The bartender moved with quiet purpose, like someone used to doing things right even when no one was watching. Chuck liked that. He liked a lot of things about Harper's. Places like this didn't change. That was the point.

"I'll have another one, please," Chuck said as he slid his empty glass toward the bartender.

"Another one?" the bartender said. "My regular bartenders hate to work the lunch shift because it's

dead, but here you are, two days in a row, doing your best to keep us in business."

Chuck gave a half-shrug. "Guess I needed to clear my head."

The bartender set the glass down. "And nothing clears the head like high-proof whiskey in the middle of the afternoon, eh?"

Chuck cracked a smile. "Now you're starting to sound like my wife."

A blade of sunlight crept across the bar. Chuck watched it while he sipped his bourbon. He thought about calling someone, but the idea of explaining what had happened in the last twenty-four hours made his stomach turn.

Two key leaders gone. Sales pipeline empty. Marketing adrift. And now the bank was "reviewing" the one thing that might've bought him some time.

He hadn't even told Susan yet. He didn't want to see the look on her face. It wouldn't be an angry look—that would have been easier. It would be the quiet, patient look, the one that says, "I believe in you, but I don't know how much more of this we can take." The truth was, Chuck didn't know either.

"Can I ask you something?" Chuck said, finally breaking the silence.

The bartender nodded, polishing a glass.

"How do you know when it's time to let something go?"

The bartender paused for just a moment, then set the glass down and leaned on the bar with both hands.

"I've seen people let go too early and regret it for the rest of their lives," he said. "And I've seen people hang on too long and lose everything they were trying to save."

Chuck nodded slowly. "So how do you know?"

"You don't. But you can ask a better question."

"What's that?" asked Chuck, raising an eyebrow.

"How does it work?"

"How does what work?"

"Your business. How does it work?"

"How do you know this has anything to do with business?" Chuck asked.

"A man walks into a bar by himself, two days in a row. If it were at night, I'd wager he had problems at home. If he's here in the afternoon, I'd wager it's business-related. How'd I do?"

"Who are you, Sherlock Holmes?" Chuck asked with a chuckle. "Okay, I'll play your game. What was your question again?"

The bartender leaned in. "Businesses only have two problems: not enough customers, or not enough capacity to serve the customers they have. Which is it for you?"

"We definitely need more customers," Chuck said. "We do great work once we get them, but lately, nothing's landing."

"Has it ever worked?" the bartender asked.

"Sure. Last year, things were going great. That's why I hired more people and ramped up our marketing—"

Chuck stopped. In all the chaos of the last few months, he'd almost forgotten how good things were just eighteen months earlier. Something had finally clicked then. Sales were growing. Marketing felt effortless. Clients were happy. Sure, it was chaotic, but it was good chaos, fun. The kind that bonds a team and builds a culture. Nothing like the chaos tearing everything apart now.

"So how did it work back then?" the bartender asked, breaking the silence. "How did customers happen?"

Chuck opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. Not because he didn't know his business—he could rattle off product features, conversion rates, churn numbers, even ad performance if he squinted at a spreadsheet. But how it works? How customers "happen"? What did that even mean?

Chuck shrugged. "It's complicated," he said, trying to mask his uncertainty.

The bartender smiled. "Well, maybe that's the problem." He reached under the bar, pulled out a cocktail napkin and a pen, and slid them in front of Chuck.

"Draw it," he said. "Right here. How it works. How customers happen."

Chuck laughed nervously. "I can't fit all of that on a napkin."

"That's probably why it isn't working," the bartender said. "Simple scales. Complicated fails."

After a long pause, Chuck spoke up. "Look, no offense, but why do you even care? You've poured me some fancy whiskey, listened to my pity party, and now you're asking me to do business therapy on a bar napkin. Who the heck *are* you, anyway?"

"Sorry, where are my manners?" the bartender replied, extending a hand. "Nathan Harper, but everyone calls me Harp."

Chuck shook his hand. "Charles Watkins, but everyone calls me Chuck. Wait, Nathan *Harper*? You own this place?"

"Guilty," Harp said. "My dad opened it in the seventies. I took it over after I sold my last company. It pretty much runs itself. I just come in a few days a week to keep an eye on things and snag a few bottles of wine to keep the home cellar stocked. But mostly, I enjoy talking to folks like you who are still in the game."

Chuck smirked. "So let me get this straight. You're a business owner, a bartender, a consultant, and a wine thief?"

"Allegedly," Harp said with a wink. Then, without asking, he slid away Chuck's half-finished bourbon

and replaced it with a glass of ice water. "Rule of the house: Once we start talking business, we switch to clear liquids and clear thinking."

Chuck frowned at the glass. He thought about making a joke about vodka being a "clear liquid" but decided against it. "Isn't serving water bad for your margins?" he asked.

"My margins are fine," Harp said. "Don't you worry about me."

Chuck took a sip. Whoever this guy was, it was clear he'd climbed the mountain more than once and lived to tell about it.

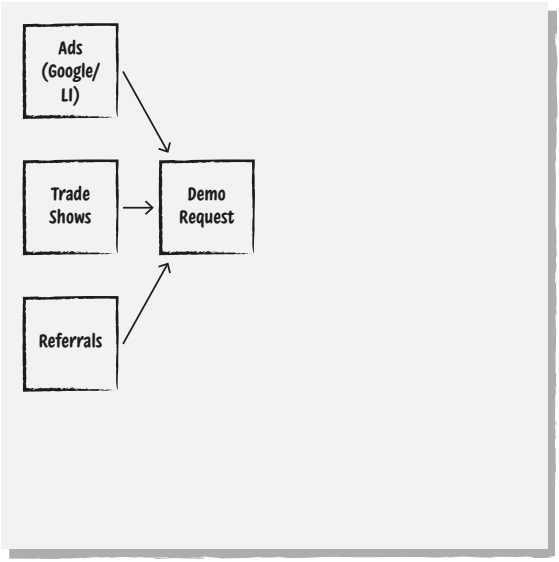
"Now, about that napkin," Harp said as he picked up the pen and handed it to Chuck.

Chuck took it and stared at the napkin. "I still don't get it," he said. "How am I supposed to describe how we get customers on this tiny napkin?"

"Well, how do clients find out about you?" Harp replied patiently. "Last I checked, that's the first step for any business. How do prospective customers become aware your company even exists?"

"We run ads—Google, Meta, LinkedIn—and get a decent number of referrals," Chuck said. "We also get leads at trade shows and industry conferences."

"Perfect. Let's start there. One box for Ads, one for Trade Shows, and one for Referrals. Then we'll connect the dots."




Chuck sketched the boxes, careful not to rip the napkin with his pen. "Okay, done. Now what?"

"Well, then what happens? What happens after someone clicks on your ad or reaches out after being referred to you?"

Chuck paused to think. "They're sent to a landing page where they can book a demo, but before we do a formal meeting, we have an initial discovery session to get a sense of their challenges and goals. It doesn't make sense to try to sell someone on our services if they have a problem we can't solve."

"I agree," Harp said. "Write Demo Request on your napkin and draw arrows connecting your other boxes to that one. Then what happens?"

Chuck stared at the napkin. *This is stupid*, he thought. *How is this supposed to solve my sales problem?*

Sensing his frustration, Harp broke the silence. "Look, I know this seems silly, but it's the first thing I do when I step into a company, whether it's one I started, one I acquired, or one I've been hired to fix. You can't optimize until you visualize."

Chuck looked up. "You can't optimize until you visualize," he repeated quietly. It sounded almost too simple, but he couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Okay, so you run online ads and get referrals, and the next step is to book an initial sales meeting," Harp continued. "Then what happens?"

"Well, then I guess we try to make the sale."

"Are you sure that's what happens next? You just told me you don't try to sell prospects who don't have a problem you can solve."

"Well, no, we obviously don't try to sell everyone," Chuck replied. "In fact, we rarely even attempt to make a sale during the first call."

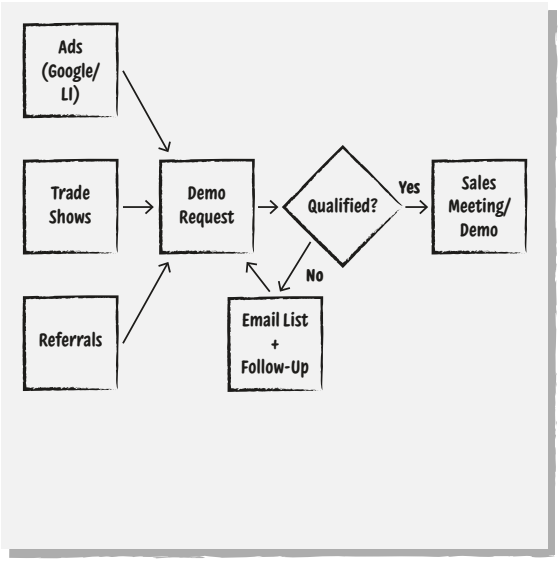
"Okay, so then what *actually* happens?"

"What do you mean?" Chuck asked with just a twinge of annoyance. "I don't know what happens. I guess it just depends."

"Ah, you said the magic words," Harp replied with a grin. "'It depends.'"

"Yeah, it depends. It depends on whether they're qualified to be a client or not."

"Perfect! That's a decision point," Harp said. "Anytime I hear 'it depends,' that's a signal that we need to add a decision diamond to our napkin. Think of a decision diamond as a fork in your customer journey, a point where a prospect will go either one way or the other. Make sense?"



"I think so."

"Great! Draw a diamond with 'Qualified?' inside it, with a Yes arrow and a No arrow. We'll follow the Yes path first. What happens next if a lead is qualified?"

"Well, then we have the actual sales meeting where we demo our solution and present the proposal, and if that goes well, we send over an agreement."

They went on like this for a few more minutes. Each time Chuck stalled, Harp would nudge him along with another "Then what happens?" question. More boxes, more arrows. Eventually the sketch got so cluttered that Chuck crumpled the napkin in frustration. Harp slid him a fresh one without a word, and he started over.

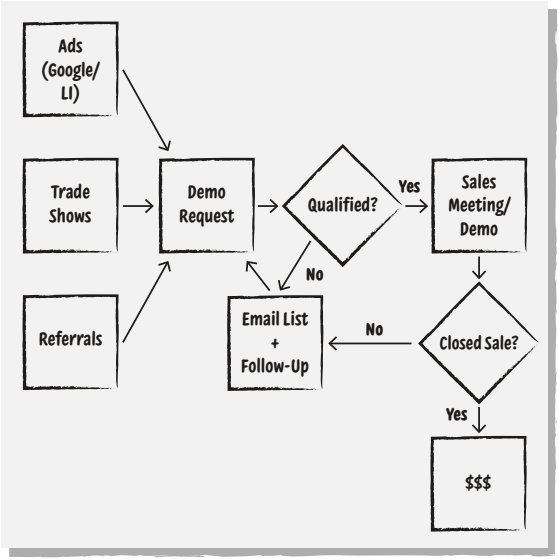
"What you're building," Harp said, tapping the napkin, "is called a Value Engine. It's a map of how a part of your business actually works. It shows how you create value, step-by-step."

"Sounds like something a Fortune 500 company would pay a consulting firm a million bucks to build," Chuck said.

"They do," Harp replied. "Big companies call it 'business process mapping' or 'value chain mapping.' They've got entire departments dedicated to it."

"Most small businesses don't know about it," he added with a shrug. "That's one of the reasons small businesses stay small."

Chuck kept sketching and Harp kept talking. When Chuck finally set the pen down, the napkin was complete. It wasn't perfect, but it was something. A glimpse of clarity—the first he'd had in months.




Chuck looked down at the napkin. "So this is a Value Engine."

"It is. And every business has a bunch of them. But the one you just drew? The one that maps how customers *happen*?" Harp paused for effect. "That

one's called a Growth Engine, and in my experience, it's the one most businesses should map first."

"Growth Engine," Chuck repeated. "This is good, but I know I'm missing some steps. I should run through this process with my team."

"That's a great idea. And when you do, feel free to swap out the napkin for a whiteboard and sticky notes. They're a lot easier to move around, and if you turn a sticky note sideways, boom: instant diamond."

Chuck smiled. He liked Harp. And thanks to him, Chuck now had something to take back to his team.

He pulled out his phone and typed a message to Beacon's leadership team, which now included Joel as interim Head of Sales.

> Let's plan on meeting tomorrow at 11 in the big conference room. I have some important updates to share, plus I want to walk us through an exercise that I think will get us some clarity. @Maya, please make sure we have lots of sticky notes.

Almost instantly, Joel replied:

> Done. Already have a few ideas. I'll come prepared.

Chuck let out a deep breath. *Maybe it's not too late.*

Just then, his phone buzzed. He didn't need to look. He already knew who the text was from. He glanced

at his watch: 6:32 p.m. "Three hours? I've been here three hours?"

Susan was patient, but there was a line. Chuck knew it because he'd crossed that line before. He still remembered the night, four years earlier, when Susan sat him down and said, "You can keep working like you're working, but you can't pretend like you're doing it for us anymore. The kids and I don't care if the business fails. We don't care if we lose everything. We just don't want to lose you."

Chuck promised that night that things would change. And they did, for a while. But now it was 6:30 on a Wednesday, dinner was on the table, and he hadn't called.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. Sure enough, there were the three words he dreaded the most: "Home for dinner?"

Chuck stared at the screen. He had no idea what he was going to say when he walked through the door.

"Sorry, I gotta go," he told Harp. "What do I owe you for the drinks?"

"These are on me. Just promise you'll come by in the next day or two and show me that finished napkin."

"Deal," Chuck said as he turned to leave. "If my wife doesn't kill me before then."

## The free preview is over, but Chuck's story is just getting started...

See how it ends and get the full "napkin" playbook, including:

- Value Engines that map how your company creates value
- Scorecards that show how well it's working, and…
- Quarterly Sprint Plans that get your team fixing what's broken

...plus bonus tools, templates, and examples when you preorder your copy at: milliondollarnapkin.com

P.S. Want your leadership team working off the same napkin? Get copies for your whole team at:

milliondollarnapkin.com/bulk

# About the Author

RYAN DEISS is a serial entrepreneur, author, and investor, and according to *Shark Tank* star Daymond John, "His companies practically own the internet."

He is the founder and CEO of The Scalable Company (Scalable.co) and a founding partner at Scalable Equity, an advisory and acquisitions group that helps owner-operated businesses scale and exit.

Ryan is also a bestselling author of multiple books, including *Get Scalable* and *Digital Marketing for Dummies*, and is a sought-after speaker who has shared the stage with top business leaders and celebrities like Sir Richard Branson, William Shatner, Gary Vaynerchuk, Martha Stewart, Tim Ferriss, and Dave Ramsey.

Most importantly, Ryan is a father of four kids (Jonathan, Joyce, Ruth, and Timmy), and a husband to Emily, to whom he gives all the credit for everything he has ever done.

# Work with Ryan

IF YOU made it this far in the book, then I'm guessing you enjoyed it (at least a little bit). And if you're ready to take what you've learned off the napkin and put it into your business, here are four ways we can work together:

**1. Download the "$200M Operating System" case study.** You've seen what a single napkin can do for a business like Beacon. Now imagine mapping Value Engines and Growth Engines across six different companies, simultaneously. This forty-six-page case study (and accompanying video) reveals exactly how we're doing that inside our $200M holding company using the Scalable Operating System™. It's the napkin exercise at scale. Download it now at **scalable.co/casestudy**.

**2. Get a free copy of my other book, *Get Scalable*.** *The Million Dollar Napkin* shows you how to map the way customers happen. *Get Scalable* is the complete, step-by-step playbook for turning that map into an operating system so your business can run and grow without you. Think of it as what Chuck built *after* the napkin. Grab your free copy at **getscalable.com/free**.

**3. Hire me to speak at your next meeting or event.** Want to hand your team a napkin and a Sharpie and watch what happens? I bring the Growth Engine exercise (and a few other tricks) to stages, off-sites, and leadership meetings. It's the fastest way to get your whole organization thinking about how customers happen. Start the conversation at **ryandeiss.com/speaking**.

**4. Work one-on-one with me and my team.** If you don't just want the napkin—you want someone to help you build the whole dang engine—my team and I offer direct, hands-on support to help you systemize and scale your business. You can get more information and schedule a free Scale Session at **scalable.co/os**.

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