

THE FINALISTS — PROJECT BRIEF

Format

Feature Film

Genre / Tone

Psychological Drama / Social Satire

The Breakfast Club meets *The Menu*.

Recognition

Honorable Mention — Finish Line Script Competition

Budget / Buyer Lane

Low / contained single-location ensemble drama

A24, Searchlight, Topic, FilmNation, NEON lane

Core Hook

Six elite scholarship finalists are accidentally locked in a glass-walled university waiting room during a record-breaking heatwave, and their polished leadership narratives collapse into a survival test.

One-Sentence Pitch

A group of hyper-competitive students arrive for the final interview for a life-changing scholarship, only to become trapped in a sealed admissions room where heat, fear, and institutional indifference strip away every carefully rehearsed version of themselves.

Why It's Timely

It satirizes elite college admissions, scholarship desperation, résumé culture, performative leadership, class pressure, diversity branding, legacy privilege, and the brutal idea that young people must package their pain to be considered valuable.

Main Characters

Madison Williams — A frantic overachiever who has optimized every second of her life into a brand. She believes control will save her until the room proves there is no perfect answer to a rigged system.

Timothy Winthrop — A legacy candidate whose entitlement hides terror. He has inherited status, but also the crushing expectation to keep winning.

Zoey Davis — A brilliant STEM applicant exhausted by the way admissions culture asks her to make her identity legible, impressive, and safe for donors.

Daniel Morales — A first-generation applicant caught between his own artistic instincts and the heroic immigrant narrative he has been taught to sell.

Jack Bradley — A fifteen-year-old prodigy who has been accelerated past childhood and into collapse.

Wyatt Garrison — A former Hawthorne scholar destroyed by the fine print. He is the ghost of the system's promise.

Story Snapshot

1. Six elite finalists arrive at Hawthorne University for the final round of interviews for one life-changing scholarship.
2. They are placed in "The Fishbowl," a glass-walled admissions waiting room overlooking the campus quad.

3. A security malfunction triggers a Level Two Containment: the doors lock, the blinds drop, the signal dies, and the AC shuts off.
4. As the heat rises, the finalists' polished identities collapse. Collaboration turns into competition, then survival, as each student reveals the pressure underneath their résumé.
5. Jack collapses from heatstroke, forcing the group to stop performing excellence and actually care for one another.

Ending / Final Image

The next morning, the system reboots and the admissions coordinator casually offers to reschedule the interviews. After everything they have survived, Timothy walks in. Then Madison follows. The machine starts again.

Theme in One Line

Meritocracy does not reward the best people. It rewards the people most willing to suffer quietly inside the system.

Positioning

It's a contained social thriller about what happens when the pressure cooker of elite achievement becomes literal — and the students realize the institution is not testing them. It has simply forgotten they are human.

Materials Available

One-pager and full screenplay available upon request or through the private script library.

RYAN CLARKE

Screenwriter & Playwright | Albuquerque, NM

Dark Comedy | Satire | Character Drama | Social Thriller

Ryan Clarke is an Albuquerque-based screenwriter and playwright whose work blends dark comedy, social satire, and intimate character drama. Across a slate of 20+ feature scripts, his stories often follow deeply flawed people pushed into impossible situations, finding humor, tension, and humanity in characters who are entirely in over their heads.

His screenwriting recognition includes Grand Prize Winner, 30th Annual Fade In Awards Comedy Competition (*#FightForNoah*); Semifinalist, 30th Annual Fade In Awards Comedy Competition (*The Trencherman*); 2026 Top 10 Finalist, ISA Table Read My Screenplay at Cannes (*A Walking Shadow*); 2026 Quarterfinalist, Finish Line Script Competition (*#FightForNoah*); two-time Semifinalist, ISA Emerging Screenwriters Competition (*Flashbang* and *Ghost of the Highway*); and four additional 2026 Honorable Mentions from Finish Line (*The Finalists*, *How to Be a Human: A Musical with No Songs*, *Ghost of the Highway*, and *Dead Signals*).

As a playwright, Ryan is a three-time winner of FUSION Theatre Company's short works festival, "The SEVEN", in 2024, 2025, and 2026. The stage version of *A Walking Shadow* was also selected in 2026 for The Road Theatre Company's 17th Summer Playwrights Festival.

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