Writer’s Note

The Finalists grew out of my time listening to teenagers talk about what they believed they had to accomplish before anyone would consider them successful. I raised three children of my own and also worked closely with many teenagers in a high school drama program. Many of them were bright, ambitious, tremendous overachievers, and I was struck by how early they had learned to think of themselves as résumés in progress. Every class, activity, volunteer hour, leadership position, and personal hardship could potentially become another line on an application.

I saw another side of that when my own children began applying for scholarships. They were strong students, but scholarship after scholarship had incredibly specific requirements involving interests, background, demographics, activities, or intended fields. They discovered they qualified for surprisingly few of them, and when they did qualify, they were competing against hundreds or thousands of other accomplished students for the same limited money. After a while, the process started to feel less like rewarding achievement and more like trying to figure out which box you were supposed to fit into.

I kept thinking about *The Breakfast Club* and what a contemporary version of that pressure cooker might look like. These aren't kids stuck in detention because they broke the rules. They're the kids who followed every rule, collected every achievement, and are still terrified they haven't done enough. I wanted to put six of them in a room together and slowly strip away the polished versions of themselves they had prepared for admissions officers. Their conflicts aren't about popularity or romance. They're about ambition, class, privilege, exhaustion, identity, and the fear that the system they've spent their lives trying to impress may barely see them at all.

A lot of the anxieties in the screenplay also came directly from conversations with young people. They worry about climate change and the world they are inheriting. They have grown up with lockdown drills and constant surveillance. They wonder whether AI and algorithms are judging their work before another person ever sees it. They feel pressure to turn hardship into a compelling personal narrative, leisure into wasted productivity, personality into branding, and nearly every decision into something that might help or hurt their future.

The satire pushes those ideas much further, but the pressure underneath it felt very real to me. These are young people who have been told that if they work hard enough, build the right résumé, and make all the correct choices, the system will reward them. Wyatt, who once won the same scholarship the finalists are competing for, represents what can happen when real life doesn't cooperate with that promise. He did everything right too, until circumstances changed and the institution moved on without him.

My theatre background naturally influenced the way I built the story. I liked the simplicity of trapping a small group of characters in one glass-walled room and letting dialogue, shifting alliances, and mounting pressure expose who they are beneath the applications. The Fishbowl is an admissions waiting room, but it is also a place where six young people who have spent years being evaluated finally start evaluating the system itself.

What stayed with me most while writing *The Finalists* was the idea that achievement can become so constant that young people stop asking what they actually want. There is nothing wrong with ambition or working hard. I just wanted to write about kids who have become so good at preparing for their futures that some of them have forgotten they are allowed to have lives in the present.