

Chapter One Excerpt

# THE PROTO PROJECT



FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CODE 7*

**BRYAN R. JOHNSON**

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# THE PROTO PROJECT

A Sci-Fi Adventure of the Mind

BRYAN R. JOHNSON



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## YOU'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT

*There were good field trips and bad field trips. The one that Jason was about to embark upon would trigger a series of events that would turn anyone into a whimpering, babbling scaredy-pants, never to board a filthy school bus again. But we can't get into the details about that unless we start from the beginning.*



Jason Albert Pascal stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror while listening to his favorite rock band *Lightning Strikes*. He styled his hair into a perfect mess using a touch of gel, then frowned at the hint of a pimple on his chin. A blemish wouldn't spoil his mood. Today, he and the rest of Buttonwood Middle School were heading to Recode Global, a super-sectretive high-tech company that was opening its doors to the public for the first time. Its megaplex of futuristic buildings was located on the outskirts of town, surrounded by invisible electric fences and security drones. The place always made Jason wonder, *What was Recode Global up to?*

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Jason's own mom, Dr. Shannon Elaine Pascal, was one of Recode's top employees. Dr. Pascal called herself a scientist, but thanks to confidentiality agreements, she couldn't give Jason specific details about her work. All he could gather from her long-winded science-y explanations was that Recode Global used technology "to solve humanity's most vexing problems." The only other clues he had about her job lay in her home office, an underground laboratory specially built for Dr. Pascal's tinkering. It was full of electronic equipment, tools, and techy parts, but she never let Jason in on what the stuff was for. Building tiny robots that could perform life-saving micro-surgeries on sick people? Was she working on space tech to colonize another planet in the event of a global warming crisis? His mother couldn't possibly be *that* cool—or could she?

Jason headed downstairs for breakfast, taking the stairs two at a time. The TV in the kitchen reported the morning news. Today would be sunny and clear, with a high of 77. *Perfect.*

He entered the kitchen and found his dad, Ray Pascal, sitting at the breakfast table, staring intently at the TV mounted on the wall. A poufy-haired anchorwoman was talking about the upcoming meteor shower that would light up Earth's sky.

"Where's Mom?" Jason said as he took a seat beside his dad at the table.

Ray held up a finger to quiet Jason.

Jason watched the TV.

"Don't forget to mark your calendars," the anchorwoman said. "Comet Swift-Tuttle is on its way. Get to Presidio Park next weekend for the best viewing!"

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Jason's dad turned to Jason. "We have to see that. Your mother would love it."

"Yeah, Dad," Jason agreed. "Sounds cool." Though he could think of a billion other things that would be more interesting than staring at a black sky, looking for itty-bitty flashing stars. "Speaking of Mom, where is she?"

"Already at the office," Ray replied. "Your mother said everyone had to go in early. Your field trip is a major event." He slid an empty bowl over to Jason and waggled a box of Choco Crunch.

Jason grabbed the box and poured himself a bowl of cereal. "Dad, what are they going to show us? Are we going to watch scientists whisper to each other or what?" He scooped up a spoonful of cereal and shoved it in his mouth. *Yum*. No need for milk.

His father chuckled. "I only know a little about what they're cooking up, but I bet by the end of the day you'll think Recode is more *off the chain* than my bikes." He elbowed Jason. "Get it? Off the chain?"

Jason groaned. Ray Pascal owned Spokes, a bicycle shop a few miles from their house. While Jason's mom loved everything science, his dad loved bikes and, unfortunately, bike jokes.

Ray got up from the table, taking his bowl with him. "Also, your mom said they're providing lunch and treats like cupcakes—you can't go wrong."

"Cupcakes?" Jason smiled at the magic word, then shoved another spoonful of cereal into his mouth. He wondered what his mother was going to show everyone that could save the world.



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The school bus went through one checkpoint after another. Jason and his classmates' excitement was palpable. "Wow!" a kid said. "Look at that!" Everyone pressed their faces against the windows for a better look. Finally, Jason could see Recode Global's buildings. With all that shiny glass and sleek metal, Recode looked like it had been ripped right out of a superhero movie. The buildings weren't tall, but the angles and curves of some of the structures seemed to defy gravity. Even the sculptures dotting the landscape could have passed as futuristic robots or objects designed by very talented aliens.

Jason's excitement doubled when he noticed a bunch of brightly colored food trucks and commercial vans flanking one side of a building—Tic-Tock-Thai, Bakin' With Bacon, Sugar-N-Spice . . . *oh yeah*.

Their bus pulled up alongside others, and students formed lines to be led into the building. As Jason surveyed the scene, he realized his dad was right. This was a *major* event. There were news crews everywhere. An older-looking man wearing a white lab coat talked into about five microphones at the same time while cameras rolled. The man gestured as he spoke, causing his crazy, Einstein-ish gray hair to wiggle with each motion.

As everyone got off the bus, Recode security guards made each student pass through security gates, then waved small credit-card-sized devices over each student. To Jason, it looked like his mom's company wasn't taking any chances. Every once in a while, a card would light up, and someone had to give up what they had, even *gum*, but oddly, everyone was allowed to keep their phones. After security checks were completed, one guard gave



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another a signal, and the mirrored double doors to Recode Global slowly slid open.

Jason and his class entered a great hall the size of a football field. The walls, ceiling, and floor were made of a smooth, silvery material. There was no furniture, decorations, or visible light fixtures—only wide-open space, clean surfaces, and a warm glow filling the vast area. A few students tried to snap pictures of the amazing nothingness with their phones, but complaints quickly filled the room.

"Hey, how come my phone doesn't work?"

"Mine won't power on."

"Same with me!"

Jason pulled his own phone from his pocket. The screen was dark, and he couldn't turn it on. *Creepy.*

A soothing female voice filled the room. "Welcome, students. Please note, photography is prohibited. Your cellular devices have been temporarily disabled."

"Kinda spooky," a girl murmured beside him.

Jason turned to look at who was talking. She had long black hair, brown eyes, and a slightly pointy chin. She was wearing a T-shirt with an image of Princess Leia on it that read *A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE RESISTANCE*. "You're Jason, right?" she asked.

Before Jason could answer, the girl went on. "My mom said your mom actually works here. I just moved a few doors down from you, so hello, neighbor!" She smiled. "I'm Maya Mateo."

Jason smiled back. "Hi."

"So, what's your mom going to show us?"

"Uh . . . honestly, I have no idea." Jason hoped it didn't involve flowcharts and diagrams. His mother was particularly good at those.

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Maya looked around the room as the rest of their schoolmates filed in. "Looks like she has a neat job. My dad's an airline pilot, a lot less fancy than this."

Just as Maya started to say something else, another female voice boomed all around them. "*Are you ready for the future?!*"

Everyone yelled in agreement.

Maya leaned in closer so Jason could hear. "Your dad owns Spokes, right? Can you meet me there tomorrow at one? I need to fix my bike."

"Sure," Jason said, even though his dad did all the fixing at the shop. Still, he hoped he could be useful to Maya. She seemed like the coolest neighbor he'd ever had. *Star Wars* and bikes? Sure beat Mrs. McGuffin and her snarling cats.

"People, I didn't hear you," the voice said, growing louder. "*Are you ready for the future?*"

Jason's whole body vibrated from the volume. He joined everyone else in shouting, "Yes!"

"Then welcome to Recode Global, where the future is *now*."

Suddenly, the lights went out.

The room was pitch black.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Maya said.

"I have no idea." Jason couldn't see a thing!

"What's going on?" came another confused voice.

As if to answer the question, a burst of electronic sounds filled the room, like a techno dance song. Multicolored waves of light pulsed through the air, and the crowd whooped to the music. Jason started to wonder if they had gone to a nightclub instead of a field trip. A velvety female voice emanated from all around. "You are in a place

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of imagination and wonder!" A circle of light appeared on the ceiling. As Jason's eyes adjusted, a woman dressed in all black, like Catwoman, descended out of the darkness on a disc-shaped hoverboard.

The disc zoomed through the air without visible rotors or jets to keep it aloft. Instead, a pair of metallic, Frisbee-sized circles from its underside crackled with bluish-white electricity. The vehicle lowered to a platform that rose up as if the floor was changing shape to give her a landing spot. The woman stepped off the disc and onto the platform. She put her hands on her hips like a true superhero.

Everyone erupted into applause.

"My name is Ula Varner," the woman said, "I'm the public relations director for Recode Global." She tapped her belt, and her all-black outfit turned sky blue. Students gasped with awe.

"If only my mom knew to shop where she does," Maya commented.

"We have gathered here the brightest, most future-literate people in the world," Ula continued. "They come from more than 100 countries all over the planet. They are physicists, geneticists, biologists, material scientists, and engineers. Our mission is to reimagine the operating systems of life to ensure the sustainability of humankind. Recode Global is here to recode the world!"

Everyone clapped again.

"You've already had a glimpse of what we are doing to accomplish that," Ula continued. "Metamaterials for our modular, malleable floor; chroma-shifting fabrics for my versatile outfit; and new transportation like the ODSCIP." She gestured to the flying hoverboard. "The

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Omni-Directional Super-Conducting Platform! That's three new technologies already. Wait until you see what's next!"

Another round of applause sounded through the room.

The ODSCIP flew up and away, and the hall filled with a soft white light. "Come this way," Ula said.

Everyone was led toward a wall that melted away to form an opening. Weirdly, there were no seats in the space within. Ushers guided the group toward spots on the floor, and Maya was directed to the opposite side of the room with her class. "Catch ya later, Jason," she said.

Jason nodded goodbye as an usher organized his class into neat rows. The room darkened. The walls, ceiling, and floor seemed to transform into fields of stars, but it was way better than any planetarium Jason had ever visited. Everything seemed so . . . real. It was like he was suspended in outer space. He reached out to a nearby star. It pulsed from his touch.

"Greetings," a male voice said. "It won't be long before we can live on other planets, even vacation in outer space." As the narrator spoke, planets and asteroids zoomed in and out of view. Then Jason saw floating translucent images against the starry backdrop. People boarded spaceships and landed on faraway planets. These "tourists" then shuttled around in rover-like vehicles from craters to mountains to planetary oceans as easily as if they were visiting a place like Hawaii to see the sights. "These grand visions are closer to reality than you think," the narrator continued. "As you tour Recode Global, prepare to be astonished. What you will see today is only the beginning."

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The group was led through another melting wall into a large space where a man dressed in a white button-down and jeans waited on a platform. He rolled up a shirt sleeve to reveal a gleaming prosthetic. "I lost my arm in combat three years ago," he explained as he held out his arm and wiggled his fingers. "But now, thanks to Recode Global, it's better than new!" The fingertips on his mechanical hand opened to reveal all sorts of tools, like a high-tech Swiss Army knife-hand.

Jason recognized a screwdriver, a mini flashlight, scissors, and . . . a laser pointer?

The man aimed the finger at a blank white wall, and a beam of red light shot out. He used it to burn a large smiley face into the wall. It wasn't just a laser pointer; it was a *laser*. "Harmless against humans," he said, "so long as you don't look at it directly."

A few students gasped.

The man laughed. "*Kidding!*"

The group continued onward, moving from room to room. Jason was riveted by mind-blowing displays and demonstrations: exoskeletons that enabled people to outrun cheetahs and lift things as heavy as elephants, giant trees that had been engineered to grow into actual treehouses—a product of something called synthetic biology—and nano-sized medical robots that could clear clogged arteries, destroy cancer cells, and knit fractured bones together.

Lunch featured a panel presentation, hosted by a couple of robot comedians who weren't all that funny. Perhaps teaching computers how to make jokes was still a work in progress. Then the students were herded into a lecture hall with a movie-theater-sized screen.

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Jason slid into a modern desk with built-in surfaces that allowed everyone to take notes using touchscreens. While people sat down, Jason spotted his mom onstage. Finally, Dr. Shannon Elaine Pascal was on.

Dr. Pascal smoothed the pockets of her white lab coat. A stray lock of her brown hair had fallen into her glasses. Jason thought she looked positively tiny in a lecture hall filled with so many curious students.

The room finally settled down, and Dr. Pascal began. "Students," Dr. Pascal said, "I have a problem for you to solve." She clicked a laser pointer in her hand and an equation appeared on a giant screen: " $HI + AI = ?$ "

With a fingertip, Jason wrote the formula onto his screen.

$HI + AI =$

He drew a sad face and sighed. Leave it to his mom to turn everything into an equation.

No one attempted to answer the question.

"First, let's address HI," Dr. Pascal said. "It stands for human intelligence, an intelligence that is unparalleled by any other living species on Earth. Then there's AI. It stands for—"

"Artificial intelligence," a girl called out.

"Correct!" Dr. Pascal replied, her face lighting up.

Jason thought his mom was probably glad that at least one person was paying attention.

"When you combine HI and AI, you get . . ." Dr. Pascal clicked the pointer and the answer appeared.

$HI + AI = \textit{The Future Today.}$

"This powerful formula," Dr. Pascal said, "is our key to solving humanity's most challenging problems *now*."

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Dr. Pascal dimmed the lights. As she spoke, images of the human brain and neural networks flashed on the screen. Then lines of programming code floated upward, followed by pictures of machines, computers, and smart devices used by people.

"Humanity working together with AI is already changing how we live," Dr. Pascal went on, "but in ways that go beyond what most people see."

Jason's mind began to wander, and he contemplated how awesome it would be if his mom wasn't just a theory person but actually built droids like the ones right out of *Star Wars*.

"To solve complex issues," Dr. Pascal said, "such as climate change, food shortages, and epidemics, we must learn how to re-engineer complex systems. But this has been hard to do with human intelligence alone. We need AI as a partner."

Then Jason's mom started using phrases like "artificial general intelligence," "deep tech," and "neural code" with sloping charts and graphs. This went on for several minutes, and Jason started to lose track; a kid in the row in front of him was doodling a picture of an army of aliens attacking a stick-figure version of a woman in a lab coat. *Not good.*

Jason's gaze wandered over to the caterers in back wearing Sugar-N-Spice T-shirts. They were setting up desserts on long tables. One caterer was massively built, making even Jason's towering dad look kind of average-sized. Jason worried his baseball-mitt hands might crush the dainty cupcakes he was setting out. Next to him, a blonde caterer with a streak of pink in her hair unloaded cookies and mini-cakes. The caterers

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watched Jason's mom as they worked. Maybe they found her confusing, too.

Suddenly all the lights in the room cut out. But this time, it didn't feel intentional.

"That's odd," Dr. Pascal commented in the dark. "Let's give this a second. No need to worry."

The lights came back on again.

Just when Jason thought his mother would continue, another Recode employee in a lab coat stepped onto the stage and whispered in his mother's ear.

"Students," Dr. Pascal announced, "I am so sorry, but I won't be able to finish my talk. If you could just follow your teacher's instructions to leave the building, that would be great." She gestured toward the exit on one side of the room.

Jason gaped from his seat. That was it? Did someone pull the plug on his mom's speech?

"Oh, and don't forget to pick up a Recode Global gift bag," Dr. Pascal continued. "Thank you for visiting."

Security officers immediately began ushering everyone out of the room. Jason heard one of them tell another, "We've got a Code 7."

*Code 7?*

Jason stared at his mother. He felt relieved that her presentation was over, but he was also ticked off that they had cut it short. His mother didn't look so happy either as she stepped off the stage.

Jason followed his teacher's instructions to line up to leave. The big dude and the pink-streak lady were putting all the goodies back into boxes. Recode wasn't going to bother letting everyone grab a snack? Jason's teacher handed him a Recode Global gift bag. He rummaged



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through it: Recode Global decals, pens, and a miniature of the ODSCIP. Not a single treat. The bag itself was a cool drawstring backpack. He slung it onto his back.

Dr. Pascal came over and took Jason aside. "I'm disappointed I couldn't finish my talk, Jason. We didn't even get to the part about how important it is to be future literate."

"I'm sad, too," Jason said. More for his mother though. "I heard a security guard say, 'Code 7.' What's that mean?"

His mother frowned. "No idea. There are some things here at Recode that even I'm not privy to." She glanced over her shoulder, then her face turned really serious. "I want you to truly understand what I do, though. Would you like that?"

"Wait, more charts?" *Umm—*

"This will be much better, I promise." She looked at him intently. "It will change how you view the world."

"Right now?" Jason noticed his class starting to leave. "Everyone's going."

"Listen, my boss and the rest of the team will be busy with press conferences all day." She scanned the room. "Really, it's now or never. They're clearing the room. When will I ever get a chance to have you here?"

Jason bit his lip. "Never?"

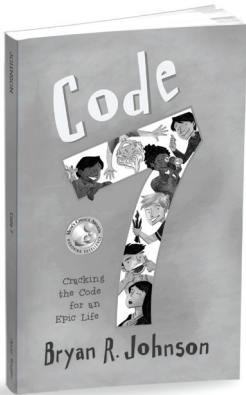
Dr. Pascal smiled. "Stay put. I'll let your teacher know that you're staying with me."

Jason had to hand it to his mother. She never gave up, and he *did* wonder what her office was like. Was it anything like her lab at home? Did people fly ODSCIPs to the water cooler? Would *he* get to ride one?

Dr. Pascal returned. "All set," she said. "It's time for you to meet my latest project. Trust me, Jason, you've never seen anything like it."



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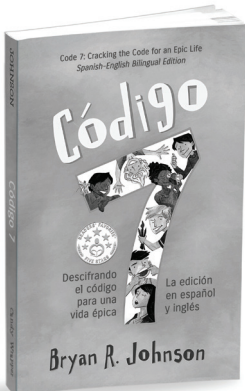
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