“Whoa!” I said, entering the basement of The County Courier. There were contraptions everywhere. Chloe and I hadn’t seen any of these before. The first machine I noticed looked like an old computer keyboard with a roller and ruler on top.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A typewriter from the 80s,” Mr. Dawson replied.

“1880s?” I asked.


“Where is the screen?” Chloe asked.

“There isn’t one.” Mr. Dawson pulled a piece of white paper from the shelf, placed it in the roller and pulled it through the typewriter using the wheel attached to the side. “We put the paper in the typewriter and typed directly on the page, praying we didn’t make a mistake. If we did, we put white liquid over the mistake. When it dried, we typed it again,” he explained.

“Did you use typewriters when newspapers first came out, Mr. Dawson?” I asked.

“Son, if I didn’t know better, I would think you’d been living under a rock. And call me Mr. D,” our boss said, making us smile. “Woody, newspapers were out long before the 1980s. And no, we didn’t use typewriters. We used a process called typesetting. See this machine?” Mr. Dawson asked, pointing to a large wooden piece of equipment. “Before typewriters were invented, we used a printing press. After a reporter wrote the story, the editor would have to form each word using sorts.

Sorts were individual letters made of cast metal and were stored in drawers in a case. The editor would pick out every sort needed to make a word and would put it in a composing stick upside down. The words made lines, then paragraphs, then pages called forms. The form was placed in the press, inked, and an impression was made and one page of the paper was complete.”

“Mom and Dad are always telling us to make a good impression,” I exclaimed.

“That’s where the phrase originated. Many others came from the printing industry. Sometimes an editor opened the case for a sort, but the drawer was empty. That’s where the phrase Out of Sorts came from. And since the composer was looking at the sorts upside down, the lowercase p and q could be confusing. Thus, the saying, “Mind your p’s and q’s.”

I felt out of sorts from all the information.

“I bet the internet makes your job easier,” Chloe said.

“Yes - until it goes down,” our boss replied, chuckling.

“What’s this?” I asked, curiosity getting the best of me. It was black and sat on the desk. On the front was a round circle with 10 little circles. Outside of the little circles were the numbers one through nine. Two through nine several letters beside them. After the number nine was a zero and the word Operator. To the right of the zero was a small metal point.

“It’s a rotary phone,” Mr. Dawson replied. “When you needed to call someone, you put your finger, or in your case toe, in the hole of the first digit and brought it to the metal stop. You pulled your finger out and the dial rotated back to its original position. You did it for each digit of their phone number.”

“What if you messed up?” I asked.

“You started over,” Mr. D. explained. “Or talked with someone you didn’t intend.”

“How’d you know everyone’s phone number?” Chloe asked.