

# chapter one

*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Penelope dragged one eye open and then the other. She'd been dreaming about a fire-eating lizard that spoke in riddles. The lizard was right in the middle of telling her something important when the alarm went off. She glared at the clock. It glared back: 6:00 a.m.

Here it was, the first day of summer vacation, and even now her mother expected her to get up and get busy. Penelope shut off the beeping and sat up. She dangled her feet over the bed and stared down at her toes. She had to be showered, dressed, and ready for breakfast in 30 minutes, which meant she'd better hurry. She wondered what it would be like to have a day off. Just once.

*This won't take long*, she told herself. Penelope dropped to the floor and began rummaging underneath her bed for one of the notebooks she kept hidden there.

Penelope's room was extremely neat. Her mother was fond of saying, "A place for everything and everything in its place." That's why Penelope kept everything that had no place in her room underneath the bed. There was the hamster habitat she was building (Penelope didn't own a hamster), the diary she was writing for her twin sister lost at sea (Penelope was an only child), and the invisible ink kit for sending secret messages (just in case she ever got stuck in a Turkish prison). And of course, there were the notebooks. Piles of



notebooks filled with all the fascinating words she had collected over the years and all the stories she had written with them.

Penelope pushed aside a box of hamster food and pulled out a small red notebook. She flipped it open and used the pencil tucked between its pages to make a quick sketch of the lizard from her dream — big eyes, long body, and a curling tongue, licking up bits of flame. When she finished, she sat back and tried to think of a name for the creature. It wasn't like naming a dog or a cat. It had to be unusual, like Beauregard or Eckbert. No. Too complicated. She needed something simple like . . . Zak. That was it!

Now that she had a name, what next? Zak couldn't just eat fire and speak in riddles. He needed an adventure. Penelope chewed on her pencil to help her think.



The smell of bacon drifted up from the kitchen and her stomach growled. She chewed harder. Maybe Zak belonged to a circus made up entirely of reptiles . . . or maybe he lived in a volcano that was about to blow up the world . . . or . . .

*Bacon!*

Penelope dropped her pencil. She realized what the smell meant. She was late. Her mother had started making breakfast, and Penelope was expected at the table. She shoved her notebook back under the bed, tore off her pajamas, and threw on some clothes. She raced down the stairs, combing her hair with her fingers. As soon as she stepped into the kitchen, her mother gave her “the look.”

“Do you *know* what time it is?”

Penelope slid into her chair. “I know,” she mumbled. Penelope couldn’t tell the truth — that she’d lost track of time. Her mother wouldn’t understand. Not when there was a clock in every room of the house and a watch on her wrist. Just because Penelope wore a watch, though, didn’t mean she looked at it. It made her nervous. The second hand never sat still. It swung around and around, sweeping the day away like sand.

Penelope’s mother put breakfast on the table and sat down. “Your father will be back from his run any minute now, so we’d better get started.” She reached across the table for her leather three-ring binder. “Let’s see what’s on the schedule for today, shall we?”

*Here we go,* thought Penelope, slumping over her plate.

“Sit up straight,” said her mother without looking up.

Penelope felt a knot form in her stomach as she waited for her mother to begin. The binder held a calendar that served as Penelope’s schedule. Each page was a single day and each day was filled with a long list of things she was expected to do. Penelope’s mother ripped yesterday’s page off the calendar and let out a satisfied sigh. “Looks like you’ve got a full day ahead of you.” She held out the calendar for Penelope to see.

There was the month (May), the date (29), and the quote from Poor Richard (whoever *he* was). After that, lines and lines of her mother’s neat handwriting filled the page:

## May 29

**Be always ashamed to catch thyself idle.**

6:30-7:00 Breakfast

7:00-7:30 Daily chores

7:30-8:30 Piano practice

8:30-8:45 Free time

8:45-9:15 Drive to dentist

9:15-10:15 Dentist appt.

10:15-10:45 Drive home from dentist

10:45-11:45 SAT vocabulary drills

11:45-12:15 Wash and polish bike

12:15-12:30 Ride bike  
12:30-1:00 Lunch  
1:00-2:00 Math tutoring  
2:00-3:00 Write b-day thank-you cards NEATLY!  
3:00-4:30 Get started on summer reading list  
4:30-5:30 Cooking lesson  
5:30-6:30 Dinner  
6:30-6:45 Free time  
6:45-7:00 Call Grandma  
7:00-8:00 Tidy room and get ready for bed

Penelope's mother cleared her throat and began to read off all the day's activities. As she did, Penelope wondered for the hundredth time just *who* Poor Richard was. Even though she had never met him, she didn't like him. He was always saying things about "industry" or "sloth." What exactly was *sloth*? It seemed like it had something to do with being lazy. But then again, wasn't a sloth an animal that looked like a sock puppet? Maybe a sloth would make a good sidekick for Zak, the fire-eating lizard . . .

"Penelope!"

Penelope looked up. Her mother was staring at her expectantly. "I *said*, hurry and finish your breakfast. It's almost time for your daily chores."



Just then, the front door swung open and a voice called out, “I’m home!” A minute later her father bounded into the kitchen.

“Hi, pumpkin,” he said and ruffled Penelope’s hair. “It’s another beautiful day out there.” He pronounced the word *beautiful* as if it were three words — *beau-ti-ful*.

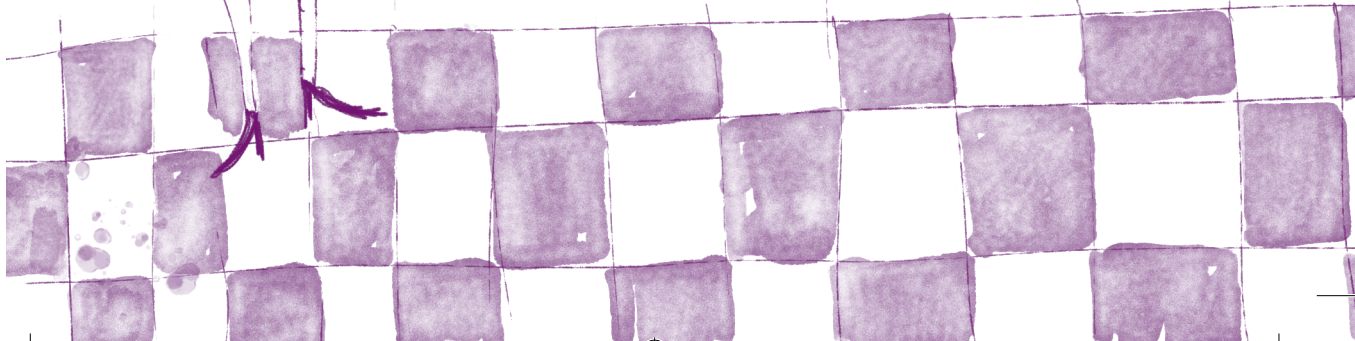
“How did it go, dear?” asked her mother, flipping to the back of the binder where she kept an account of his daily runs — time, date, distance.

“Great! Five miles, 41:4.”

Penelope’s mother recorded the information and shut the binder. “Your day is off to a good start,” she said, as if the numbers proved it.

“It certainly is!” Her father downed a glass of water and then sat at the table to peel a banana. “I bet you have a lot to look forward to today, huh, kiddo?” he said and reached for the paper.

Penelope crammed a piece of toast in her mouth and mumbled something unintelligible. Her dad wouldn’t





understand. He looked forward to *every* day. He was an insurance agent, and although he helped people prepare for disasters — death, disease, fire — he was so happy all the time you would have thought he worked at Disneyland.

Penelope finished her toast and got up from the table.

“I guess I’d better get started on my chores.”

Her dad glanced up from the sports page. “Go get ‘em, tiger,” he said, giving her a thumbs-up.

Her mother, who was on the phone, just waved.

