A Whisker from Home

A House Full of Secrets

Independent or supported chapter reading



Meet Minnie, Pip, Tansy and Soot in their home, the Nook. Read Chapter One and investigate the first clues in Buttonwood House.

A free taste of the book, plus a new supplementary activity. The full book and complete teaching resources are separate.

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A House Full of Secrets

Buttonwood House was full of places that people never saw.

Behind the kitchen cupboards, narrow passages ran between the walls. Beneath the stairs, a low hollow stretched into darkness. Old pipes crossed the house above the ceilings, carrying warm water through rooms the little cats had never entered. Between the floorboards and the plaster were spaces where lost things collected: crumbs, threads, seeds, scraps of paper and, sometimes, buttons that had slipped from someone’s clothes.

The cats knew about these places because they lived among them.

Their home, the Nook, was tucked behind the lowest kitchen cupboards. It was small, but many careful paws had made it comfortable. Matchboxes had become drawers. A thimble made a sturdy cup, and a flat piece of cork served as a plate. Scraps of cloth covered the coldest walls, while a worn strip of green fabric lay across the floor as a rug. The furniture was not all the same size, and nothing matched, but everything had its place.

Minnie woke when the morning light reached the Nook.

It slipped through a gap behind the cupboards and appeared beneath the little curtain that covered their window. The light touched the edge of the rug, moved slowly towards the table and stopped before it reached Pip’s bed. He was still asleep beneath a green handkerchief, curled so tightly that only the tip of his tail showed. Minnie watched the tail twitch.

She was about to tug the handkerchief when she heard the house creak above them. It was a familiar morning sound: the old boards warming as daylight spread through the kitchen. A pipe gave a faint sigh behind the wall, and the kitchen clock ticked on, steady as a tiny heart.

At the table, Tansy was already mending a collecting bag. She drew the thread through the cloth and tightened the stitch with her teeth. Beside her lay a round brass button, dull gold in the dim light. A small flower had been pressed into its face. It was one of Tansy’s favourite finds, and she often used it to hold the mouth of the soft collecting bag open while they gathered crumbs.

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Across from her, Soot was examining the bread tin.

He opened it, peered inside and closed it again with care.

“There isn’t much,” he said.

“There’s enough for breakfast,” Tansy replied without looking up.

Soot opened the tin once more. “There’s enough for a small breakfast.”

“If you keep checking, there’ll be enough for no breakfast at all.”

Minnie smiled and crossed the room. Tansy tested the strap she had been mending, then held the bag out for Minnie to inspect. It was made from brown cloth, worn smooth where little paws had gripped it over the years. The strap had frayed near the seam, and Tansy’s new stitching sat neatly along the edge.

“That should hold,” Minnie said.

“It had better. We’ll need to go to the pantry today.”

Minnie looked towards the entrance to the passage.

“For crumbs?”

“For crumbs, and whatever else has fallen beneath the shelves.” Tansy folded the bag and placed it beside the brass button. “We’ll wait until the kitchen is quiet.”

A rustle came from Pip’s bed. Minnie turned just as his paw emerged from beneath the green handkerchief, reaching blindly across the floor.

“Are you awake?” she asked.

“No,” Pip said.

His paw continued searching until it found the edge of the rug. He pulled it over his head.

Minnie went over and lifted one corner of the handkerchief. “You can sleep after breakfast.”

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“I was dreaming about a warm roll.”

“That sounds like breakfast.”

“It was much bigger than breakfast.” Pip opened one eye. “It had a soft middle.”

“Then you’d better get up before Soot eats our share.”

Soot closed the bread tin. “I wouldn’t eat all of it.”

“You’d eat all of your share,” Minnie said.

“And what is wrong with that?”

Nothing, Minnie thought. She helped him set the small plates on the table while Tansy divided the bread. Their meal was modest: a softened crumb for each of them, with a little water to make it easier to chew. Soot took his to the quiet corner beside the wall, where he could eat without anyone leaning over him.

Pip sat next to Minnie and tried to make his portion last by taking the tiniest bites he could manage.

After breakfast, Tansy checked the collecting bag.

She tucked a short length of thread into its pocket, then picked up the brass button. Its edges were worn smooth, and one of its four holes had been darkened by years of use.

“This will keep the bag open while we’re gathering,” she said. “Last time, we spent half the trip trying to stop the cloth from folding in on itself.”

She looped the bag’s narrow tie through one of the buttonholes, securing it near the opening. Minnie watched her pull the cloth into a neat oval. The little flower on the button caught the sunlight.

While Tansy prepared the bags, Minnie gathered her own small things: a folded square of cloth, useful for carrying seeds, and a smooth pebble she sometimes used as a wedge to keep a passage door open. Pip chose nothing, then returned to his bed and came back with a piece of blue thread caught around one paw.

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“For later,” he said, winding it carefully around his wrist. Tansy waited beside the inner door. Before leaving the Nook, the cats always stopped to listen.

The world beyond their home was enormous and full of sounds that could not be judged by their size. A footstep might be far away, or it might make the whole floor shiver. A door could close gently and send a draught along a passage. Even a quiet room could change without warning.

Soot put his ear to the door. They waited through the kitchen clock’s next three ticks. No footsteps came.

There was no human voice, no cupboard door and no chair scraping across the floor.

“Clear for now,” Soot murmured.

Tansy opened the door just wide enough for them to pass. The pantry passage began behind the cupboards, running alongside the kitchen wall. In places, it was broad enough for two cats to walk together; elsewhere, nails and splintered boards forced them into single file. The air smelled of warm wood and flour. Minnie followed Tansy, remembering to duck beneath the bent nail near the first turn.

Pip came behind her. His whiskers brushed the wall, and he stopped to inspect a thread snagged on a splinter.

“Leave it,” Minnie whispered.

“I’m looking.”

“You can look while we walk.”

“What if it’s useful?” Tansy glanced back. “If it is still there when we come back, you can decide whether it’s useful.”

Pip gave the thread one last thoughtful look, then hurried to catch up.

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The passage narrowed near the pantry. Light shone through thin seams in the boards, laying pale stripes across the dusty floor. Tansy paused at the bend and listened. From the kitchen came the clock’s tick and the low hum of the large cold cupboard. Nothing else moved.

She beckoned them forward.

The pantry opening was hidden beneath the lowest shelf. Tansy slipped through first, checked in both directions, then signalled for the others to follow. To Minnie, the pantry always seemed larger than it looked from the passage. The shelves rose above them like the sides of a wooden cliff, crowded with jars, tins and paper packets. Dusty light gathered in the corners. The air carried the rich smells of flour, oats, dried fruit and bread.

They stayed close to the bottom shelf, where they could move unseen. Tansy set down the collecting bag and adjusted the brass button so the soft cloth stayed open. Soot searched the narrow edges of the floor, keeping an eye on the kitchen door while Minnie gathered crumbs from beneath the bread shelf.

Pip found a crumb almost as large as his head and pushed it along the floor with his shoulder.

He made slow progress until the crumb caught against a stone in the flagging. Pip leaned his whole weight into it. The crumb turned over, released a shower of dry flakes, and rolled back against his paws.

Minnie helped him lift it. “We can carry it together.”

“I was going to.”

“I know. You were just waiting for it to turn around.”

They tucked the large crumb into the bag and filled the corners with the smaller pieces Minnie had collected. Tansy found a few seeds near the flour sack and placed them in a fold of cloth. The brass button held the bag open while they worked, its bright surface almost disappearing beneath the dust.

They had nearly finished when the kitchen door opened.

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A draught swept through the pantry, lifting dust around Minnie’s feet. She froze beside the shelf with one paw still raised. Pip tucked himself behind the crumb bag. Tansy pressed close to the wall, and Soot lowered himself near the floor.

Human footsteps crossed the kitchen. The boards trembled above them, one step at a time. Minnie knew better than to count them. The person might turn around, and the sound would begin again. She held still until the steps passed beyond the pantry door and faded into another room.

The draught had caught the collecting bag. Its loose edge folded inwards, and the brass button slipped from the tie.

Minnie heard a faint ting against the stone. She turned her head, but Soot was watching the kitchen door and Tansy was easing the bag away from the shelf. Another sound came from the kitchen: a hard clatter, followed by a human voice. The tiny ring of brass was lost beneath it.

Tansy pinched the cloth together and retied the bag.

The button was gone from its edge, but no one noticed. They were all watching the kitchen.

Only after the footsteps had crossed to the far side of the room did Tansy signal that they could move. They collected the last seed and began the careful journey home, carrying the crumb bag between them.

Minnie had been gathering from a narrow space behind one of the tins. She reached in for a final seed and noticed a small patch where the dust had been disturbed. A thin mark crossed it, leading towards the wall behind the shelf.

At the end of the mark, the boards met in a seam Minnie had never paid attention to before. One edge had been scraped, leaving a pale line where the dark wood showed through. A few tiny splinters lay on the floor.

She called softly to Tansy.

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Tansy returned and crouched beside her. She did not touch the seam. Instead, she examined the scrape and the disturbed dust, then looked along the wall as though trying to remember whether anything had changed.

“Have you seen this before?” Minnie asked. “I’ve seen the boards,” Tansy said. “I don’t remember that mark.”

A cool thread of air slipped through the seam. Minnie felt it stir the fine fur along her cheek. The smell was unlike the pantry: dry plaster, old dust and something warm that she could not quite recognise.

Pip shifted behind them. “Could it be a passage?”

“It could be a gap between the boards,” Tansy said.

“We don’t know yet, so we won’t put our paws inside.”

From beyond the wall came a faint scrape.

It was not loud. It sounded like something sliding along the other side of the wood, then stopping. The cats gathered close together without speaking. Tansy listened for a second sound, but none came.

“We’ve collected enough,” she said. “We’ll go back and talk about this at home.”

Soot led them towards the opening beneath the shelf.

Minnie glanced back once. The scraped seam was almost invisible in the pantry’s dim light, and the trail in the dust looked no more than a smudge. Tansy carried the collecting bag between them, still closed around the crumbs and seeds. The brass button did not shine at its edge anymore, but the cats had not noticed.

At the Nook, they put away the food before settling down to talk. Pip placed the crumb bag on the table, and Tansy began to untie its mouth. The cloth loosened easily. She spread it flat and frowned. “The brass button’s gone.”

Minnie looked at the bag. She remembered the sound in the pantry: a tiny ting, almost swallowed by the clatter from the kitchen.

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“I heard something fall when the draught came through,” she said. “I thought it was a seed.”

Tansy looked towards the pantry passage, then back at Minnie. “The button could have rolled anywhere beneath that shelf.”

Soot turned the bag inside out, checking its folds. Pip crouched to search the floor beneath the table.

Minnie joined him, though she already knew they would not find it there.

Tansy picked up the bag and folded it carefully. “We’ll look for it when the kitchen is quiet. Until then, no one goes back to that seam alone.”

Minnie could not stop thinking about the button rolling across the pantry floor, past the edge of the shelf, towards the scraped line in the dust. She imagined it catching beneath the board, close to the cool breath of air that had touched her whiskers.

Buttonwood House was full of places that people never saw.

Minnie had always thought she knew most of them.

Now, with the brass button missing and something moving beyond the pantry wall, she wondered what else was waiting behind the boards.

The missing button: clue notes

What happens to the brass button? What does Minnie notice near the wall? Separate what the chapter tells you from what you predict.

What the chapter tells us

What I think might have happened

A question I want the next chapter to answer

Speak, point, draw, write, sign, use AAC or ask someone to scribe. You can skip a question.

A little guidance for adults

Begin with a choice

Offer the activity and explain what it involves. Let the learner choose how to take part, take a break or stop.

Read and notice

Use the included extract or the real page previews on the book page. Invite observations before giving your interpretation.

Make space for a response

Allow processing time. Accept speech, gesture, pointing, drawing, signing, AAC or silence. Avoid turning a shared story into a test.

Try one small next step

Use the supplementary activity. Notice the learner’s ideas and adapt the materials, pace and response method.

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