

# THE LAST HOPE



SUSAN ELIA MACNEAL

BOOK CLUB KIT

# LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

## DEAR READER,

It's been a joy and privilege to bring Maggie Hope and her friends to life through this series for the last twelve-plus years and eleven books.

I love Maggie's evolution in *The Last Hope* and hope you will, too. She's back with lots of old friends—David, Chuck, John, Winston Churchill, and even Mr. K. And she has new friends (and enemies and “frenemies”) as well—the real-life Coco Chanel, Kim Philby, Werner Heisenberg, Juanito Belmonte, and Walther Schellenberg, who pose new challenges.

*The Last Hope* brings Maggie full circle. She goes from someone who foils an assassination attempt in *Mr. Churchill's Secretary* to being an assassin herself in the final novel. She also goes from a brilliant but somewhat closed-off girl with commitment issues to a mature young woman, now with a family of friends, open to love, and playing a larger, more active role in a far more complicated world.

Although Maggie Hope's journey's over, mine as a novelist's definitely not! I'll continue to write strong and smart women characters, in the tradition of Maggie, with a new stand-alone novel (set in London 1966) and a new mystery series (set in New York City 1953) for the brilliant editor Keith Kahla of Minotaur/Macmillan. And I can't wait to share them with you!

Thank you for reading—

**YOURS SINCERELY,  
SUSAN ELIA MACNEAL**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The setting of *The Last Hope* is pivotal to the novel, as World War II is reaching a critical point. How effectively did the story immerse you in that time period and locations?
2. Discuss the representation of gender roles in the book. How do Maggie and the other female characters break traditions and challenge societal expectations for women, particularly during the war?
3. Coco Chanel is depicted as a “horizontal collaborator” with ambiguous loyalties. How does the author navigate the complexities of her character? Did you find her motivations and actions believable? Did you know this aspect of Coco Chanel’s history in real life prior to reading *The Last Hope*?
4. Werner Heisenberg’s role as a physicist involved in Germany’s nuclear program is central to the story. How effectively does the author convey the tension and danger surrounding the development of nuclear weapons during World War II?
5. Maggie Hope’s mission is to assassinate Werner Heisenberg, a physicist involved in Germany’s nuclear program, in order to keep Germany from possessing a nuclear bomb. Discuss the moral dilemma faced by Maggie, and the potential ramifications of her actions involved in the mission. How does this mission challenge her own principles and the ideals of the Allies?
6. Discuss the role of family and heritage in the story, particularly surrounding Maggie’s pregnancy and the question of her own father. How do the characters’ personal histories and family connections influence their actions and decisions during the war?
7. How has the character of Maggie Hope changed and grown over the course of this series, as a spy and as a person? How did you feel about the conclusion of her arc in this novel, and series?
8. How has following Maggie’s journey affected your perspective on historical events and the experiences of people during World War II?
9. Reflect on the ending of the novel. Did it provide a satisfying conclusion to the series? Were there any surprises or unresolved plot threads that left you wanting more?

# WHO'S WHO IN *THE LAST HOPE*

## MAGGIE HOPE

- MI-6 spy
  - Undercover as Miss Paige Kelly, an Irish citizen
  - Daughter of Clara Hess, German opera star and Nazi intelligence agent
  - Owes a favor to Coco Chanel, who saved her life
- 

## JOHN STERLING

- Maggie Hope's ex (and hopefully future) fiancé
- 

## KIM PHILBY

- Harold Russell Philby—"Kim"
  - Head of the Iberian Section of MI-6
  - Code name: Sonny
- 

## COCO CHANEL

- Gabrielle Bonheur Chanel—"Coco"
  - Born illegitimately in a charity hospital in western France
  - Grew up at the orphanage at the Convent of Aubazine
  - Famous high-end fashion designer
  - Believes she has blackmail on Winston Churchill
  - Code name: Westminster
- 

## TOM BURNS

- Press attaché to the Spanish Embassy
- Maggie's "personal guide to Madrid"

## SPATZ

- Baron Hans Gunther von Dincklage—"Spatz"
  - Coco's younger lover
  - German aristocrat and Nazi supporter
  - Renowned playboy
- 

## WERNER HEISENBERG

- Brilliant German scientist
  - A pioneer in the study of subatomic particles
  - Winner of the 1932 Nobel prize in physics for the creation of quantum mechanics
- 

## ÁNGEL RAMOS

- Don Miguel Ángel Ramos
  - From Oaxaca, Mexico
  - His cover: he's the Walt Disney Company's representative in Portugal and Spain
  - MI-6 agent—or so Maggie thinks . . .
  - Double agent working with Russians
- 

## JUANITO BELMONTE

- Famous bullfighter
  - Charmed by Maggie Hope
  - Acts as her escort and protector
- 

## PETER FRAIN

- Old friends with Coco Chanel—and Maggie's mother, Clara
- Set up Maggie's mission to Spain
- Had an affair with Maggie's mother, Clara
- Potentially Maggie's birth father

# RECIPES | SANGRIA (TRADITIONAL AND MOCKTAIL)

To be fair, the characters of *The Last Hope* drink mostly vermouth (vermouth), gin tonic (Spanish gin and tonic with lots of garnish), and cava (Spanish sparkling wine) in Madrid. But sangria—either traditional or the equally delicious mocktail—seems perfect for readers, especially book clubs, since it can easily be made in large quantities for a group.

This classic red sangria is from Lidey Heuck of *The New York Times* Cooking section, and comes together in just minutes. Any dry red wine will work, but the fruit-forward Spanish reds make them ideal (as well as more authentic). You can also substitute juice—cranberry, pomegranate, and hibiscus tea all work well. The amount of sugar added depends on your personal preference, the red wine or juice you choose and the ripeness of the fruit. If you prefer a boozier sangria, you can increase the amount of brandy to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (in that case you may want to add additional sugar as well). Sangria is best served within 48 hours, when the fruit has softened but is still fresh. Serve in large glasses over ice, if desired, with a few pieces of wine-soaked fruit as a delicious and potent garnish.



## INGREDIENTS

- 1 orange, halved and thinly sliced into half moons
- 1 red or green apple, halved, cored and thinly sliced into half moons
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cups thinly sliced strawberries (or any fruit in season, about 8 ounces)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup orange juice (freshly squeezed if possible)
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup brandy
- 2 to 4 tablespoons granulated sugar, to taste
- 1 (750 milliliter) bottle fruity red wine OR 750 milliliter cranberry juice, pomegranate juice, grape juice, or hibiscus tea
- Ice, for serving (optional)

## PREPARATION

### STEP 1

In a large pitcher, combine the orange, apple, strawberries, orange juice, brandy (if using), and sugar. Toss well, until the sugar is mostly dissolved. Add the red wine (or juice) and stir. Taste for sweetness and add sugar if desired.

### STEP 2

Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours, or up to 48, to let the flavors meld. Serve over ice, if desired, with a few pieces of fruit from the pitcher.

# RECIPES | CHURROS Y CHOCOLATE

In *The Last Hope*, Maggie enjoys churros y chocolate at the Embassy Tea Room. Yes, it's a real place, although now closed. Opened in 1931 by French émigré Margarita Kearney Taylor, this café brought the concept of British high tea to Madrid. For almost a century, this is where the city's hoi polloi gathered, along with both Allied and Axis diplomats from the nearby embassies. Maggie goes there with Tom Burns, the wartime attaché to the British Embassy in Madrid (and a real-life World War II spy—check out his fascinating true story in *Papa Spy: Love, Faith, and Betrayal in Wartime Spain*, written by his son, Jimmy Burns).

Churros y chocolate was something I enjoyed on my research trip to Madrid for *The Last Hope* as well—my first Spanish textbook used in freshman year in high school was named *Churros y Chocolate*, and it seemed only right to give it a try. . . .

From Mark Bittman, in *The New York Times* Cooking section: “In the world of fresh pastry, few things are quicker than churros—those cruller-like strips of crisp fried dough that are street-corner snacks in Spain, Mexico, and some New York City subway stations. In fact, there are few breakfast dishes or last-minute late-night snacks that can match a batch of churros. If there is a recipe ideal for learning deep frying, this is it. The dough is extremely forgiving, and will brown nicely at any temperature in the neighborhood of 350°F; with a frying thermometer, you can hit the temperature right on the money. The only trick, as with all deep frying, is to not crowd the dough strips. Work in batches. Once the strips are gloriously brown, turn them in a sugar-cinnamon mixture and serve hot, or at least warm. Cold churros are certainly edible, but they're a far cry from hot ones.”

## INGREDIENTS

- Corn, grapeseed, canola, or other neutral oil for frying
- ½ cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ cup or 1 stick butter
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 3 eggs



# RECIPES | SPANISH HOT CHOCOLATE

Churros are often enjoyed with Spanish hot chocolate, which is much thicker and richer than North American hot chocolate—almost like a hot chocolate pudding. For special occasions, Spaniards drink chocolate alongside a plate of golden, crispy churros. At churrerías throughout the country, patrons dunk crispy churros into the chocolate. Closer to Christmas, try Rosquillas (Spanish donuts) instead! (Or dip doughnuts, cookies, and/or fruit, like a Swiss fondue. It's traditional to serve Spanish hot chocolate in small cups (about 4 ounces).

## INGREDIENTS

- 4 ounces dark chocolate (70% cacao), broken or cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 2 ¼ cups whole milk
- 2 teaspoons white sugar, or to taste
- 1 pinch of salt
- ½ teaspoon cornstarch
- Cayenne pepper to garnish top (optional)

## PREPARATION

1. Coarsely chop the chocolate into half-squares.
2. Pour the milk into a medium saucepan and add the cornstarch. Whisk until the cornstarch is dissolved.
3. If you want a sweeter hot chocolate, add the sugar. Two teaspoons is enough to make it pleasantly sweet, but adjust to your liking. Whisk until dissolved.
4. Put the saucepan over medium heat until the milk starts to boil, stirring frequently. Remove it from the heat.
5. Add the chocolate to the saucepan and stir until completely melted. If the milk cools too soon, return it to the heat. Be careful not to keep over the heat too long, as the mixture will thin.
6. If you want to add a kick of spice to your hot chocolate, add the cayenne pepper and whisk to combine.
7. Taste for sweetness and spice and adjust if necessary.
8. Pour or ladle into cups straight away and serve immediately, ideally with churros.

*As they say in Spain, "Buen apetito!"*



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR *THE LAST HOPE*

Truth really is stranger than fiction—and I'm delighted to share some of the facts behind the inspiration of this novel.

Let's talk first about Coco Chanel. Back when I was writing *The Paris Spy*, I was fascinated by the nonfiction book *Sleeping with the Enemy* by Hal Vaughn, which details Chanel's affair with Nazi spy Hans Gunther "Spatz" von Dincklage. There wasn't room in *The Paris Spy* to go too far into Chanel's story with the Nazis, but I never forgot—and I'm so glad I was able to go back to it.

Was Chanel a spy for the Nazis? Yes. Did she have a lover who was a well-known and high-ranking Nazi? Yes. Was she a collaborator? Yes. Was she a Nazi? I can't answer that.

However, according to all the research I did, Chanel was virulently anti-Semitic—even for Paris in those days—and willing to use the Nazis' Aryanization laws in France to wrestle her perfume company back from the Wertheimers, who were Jewish.

But as the fashion model and spy Toto said to Laura Aitken, in Alan Frame's *Toto & Coco: Spies, Seduction, and the Fight for Survival*: "It might seem strange that Coco had lovers who were Nazis and such rabid anti-Semites at the same time as being friends with Winston Churchill and [his son] Randolph. But that's how it was before the war. Everyone hoped some arrangement could be made to stop Hitler from going further. Of course that never happened, and it was then that we all had to make up our minds about which side we were on. I knew quite a few German officers, and, with few exceptions, they were smart, very civilized and charming. They weren't all monsters but, sadly, it only took a few

monsters to start a war and bring about such unimaginable horrors. I should know. When all that became clear, that's when Coco should have turned her back on the Nazis. But no, she was too concerned with her own wealth to worry about what was right and wrong."

The facts are that Coco Chanel really was Agent F-7124, codenamed Agent Westminster, and she took two trips to Madrid for the Nazis during the war, both under the pretext of opening a new shop. I've used more of the second trip as inspiration, but the first was in service of freeing her nephew from a concentration camp and is worth reading about in detail in Vaughn's book.

The mission from Heinrich Himmler and intelligence chief Werner Schellenberg is factual. They wanted Chanel to use her social connections with Winston Churchill and other high-ranking British to send a message regarding the offer of a separate peace with Germany sans Hitler. *Himmler's Secret War: The Covert Peace Negotiations of Heinrich Himmler* by Martin Allen goes into detail for those who want to know more.

And how did Chanel avoid arrest and retribution after the war?

Although she escaped all charges, the matter of her collaboration did resurface briefly in May 1946, when Judge Roger Serre of Paris brought a suit against Chanel for espionage. In court, when confronted with the facts of Operation Modelhut, as well as her attempt to use her Nazi connections to take Parfums Chanel away from the Wertheimers, Chanel simply denied

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everything. When pressed, she offered only lies; for example, she didn't know anyone in the German military. The court knew she was lying, and the transcript reads. "The answers Mlle Chanel gave to this court were deceptive." But she was never arrested or charged.

*In Sleeping with the Enemy*, Vaughn speculates that Churchill intervened to shield Chanel from prosecution. "One theory has it that Chanel knew Churchill had violated his own Trading with the Enemy Act (enacted in 1939, which made it a criminal offense to conduct business with the enemy during wartime) by secretly paying the Germans to protect the Duke of Windsor's property in Paris. The duke's apartment in the Sixteenth Arrondissement of Paris was never touched when the Windsors were exiled in the Bahamas, where the duke was governor.

"A Windsor biographer claimed 'had Chanel been made to stand trial for collaboration with the enemy in wartime she might have exposed as Nazi collaborators the Windsors and a number of other highly placed in society. The royal family would not easily tolerate an exposé of a family member.'

"The royal family was so touchy about the duke's collaboration that Anthony Blunt, the royal historian, was sent to Europe in the final days of the war. Blunt, who was later exposed as a Russian spy, traveled secretly to the German town of Schloss Friedrichshof in 1945 to retrieve sensitive letters between the Duke of Windsor, Adolf Hitler, and other prominent figures. (The duke's correspondence with Hitler and the Nazis remains secret.)"

And while General Walter Schellenberg could have

told all about Operation Modelhut—he never did. Schellenberg was sentenced to six years in prison at the Nuremberg Trials for war crimes. He was released after two years on the grounds of ill health. During his time in prison, however, he had written his memoir, *The Labyrinth* (still in print today). But there isn't one mention of Chanel.

Apparently she paid him off, giving him and his wife a house in Switzerland and then a villa in Italy. She also paid his medical bills for treatment of terminal liver cancer. Before he died, Chanel made sure she had his word that her name would not appear in *The Labyrinth*.

Historian Katrin Paehler, author of excellent *The Third Reich's Intelligence Services*, states: "Schellenberg subsequently contacted Coco Chanel who eventually called on Schellenberg—in a black Mercedes nonetheless—and handed him 30,000 francs. Indeed, it appears that Chanel had already given Schellenberg a substantial sum in June 1951, after learning that he intended to publish his memoir. Chanel had collaborated with both Abwehr and SD—including yet another ill-fated attempt to contact the Western Allies, in this case the British in 1943—and might have hoped to keep her name out of Schellenberg's book.

"Schellenberg's widow Irene, who eventually handled the book's publication, stated, 'Madame Chanel offered us financial assistance in our difficult situation, and it was thanks for her that we were able to spend a few more months together.'" Schellenberg died in Turin at age forty-two on March 31, 1954.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR *THE LAST HOPE*

The looking-glass opposite of Coco Chanel on the Allied side is Aline Griffith, also known as the Countess of Romanones. Griffith was an American, working for the OSS (the precursor to the CIA) during World War II, and she told her stories in a series of books, including *The Spy Wore Red: My Adventures as an Undercover Agent in World War II*. As she herself says in the introduction: “In the course of lecturing over the past eight years, I’ve discovered that people enjoy (and need) authentic, firsthand information about espionage, a topic on which reliable information is (understandably) difficult to come by. What I have attempted in this book is to inform and to entertain.”

From this book, I learned how a secret agent from an Allied nation would operate in neutral countries, such as Portugal and Spain. I also learned about her fellow agent, Edmundo Lassalle, who was from Mexico and the United States and worked for the Walt Disney Company. Although I based certain aspects of my character Don Miguel Ángel Ramos on him, Lassalle was not a Communist and not a double agent.

Like Griffith, Maggie meets a legendary bull fighter, the very real Juanito Belamonte, who courts her, as he wooed Griffith in real life. (And Griffith went on to marry him!) And Griffith knew Tom Burns and Ambassador Samuel Hoare. My Doña Rosa was inspired by her Doña Mimosa. And Maggie is given the task of smuggling out microfilm out of Madrid, as Griffin was.

*The Spy Wore Red* is so fantastical, I checked up on Griffith’s research by reading Larry Loftis’s excellent *The Princess Spy: The True Story of World War II Spy Aline*

*Griffith, Countess of Romanones*. And yes, according to Loftis, almost everything is factual—except she changed her code name from Butch to Tiger (which is understandable).

And while we’re talking about real heroes of the war, a shoutout to the owner of the Embassy café, Margarita Kearney Taylor. An Irishwoman from France, she brought the concept of British high tea to Madrid, as Maggie enjoyed with Burns. But Taylor was also a leader of a covert wartime operation that helped Allied servicemen and Jewish refugees escape Nazi-occupied Europe. They would be smuggled secretly to her tea room in Madrid, then sent on to ports in Gibraltar and Portugal, and, ultimately, to freedom in Britain and the United States. I couldn’t fit this detail in, but Taylor certainly deserves her own book.

Where to start with spy and would-be assassin Mo Berg? You may already know him from the 2018 film, *The Catcher Was a Spy*, starring Paul Rudd, or some of the excellent biographies, such as Thomas McDonough’s *Moe Berg: The Secret Files*, which I relied on.

Like Griffith, Berg was an American working with OSS, the United States’s new intelligence section and the precursor to the CIA. A former professional baseball player, Berg was ordered to assassinate German physicist Werner Heisenberg, believed to be finished with, or close to finishing, Germany’s first atomic bomb.

I’m fascinated with Berg’s story for many reasons, but not least of all because he used his intelligence to

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intuit that Germany did not have the bomb, and so Heisenberg did not need to be assassinated. A life saved instead of taken.

How did it happen? In late 1943, Heisenberg was scheduled to speak at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. Berg attended the lecture and listened for clues as to whether or not the Germans were close to building an atomic bomb. Like Maggie, he carried a gun and a suicide pill. If the scientist indicated that the Germans were on the brink of nuclear warfare, he was to kill Heisenberg. The suicide pill was in case he was caught and might reveal the secrets of the Manhattan Project.

After the lecture in Switzerland, the Gestapo sent a message to Heisenberg's superiors, stating that he had made defeatist statements in Switzerland. Those pessimistic statements, perhaps made to or in front of Berg, probably saved his life. As McDonough writes, "The avatar of uncertainty was certainly a lucky man."

What I love about this historically grounded assassination attempt is Maggie started out as thwarting an assassination attempt in *Mr. Churchill's Secretary* and goes on to become a would-be assassin herself. When she began, she was excellent at math and codes, and not so comfortable with her fellow human beings. Now, she's relying as much on her emotional intelligence as her intellect.

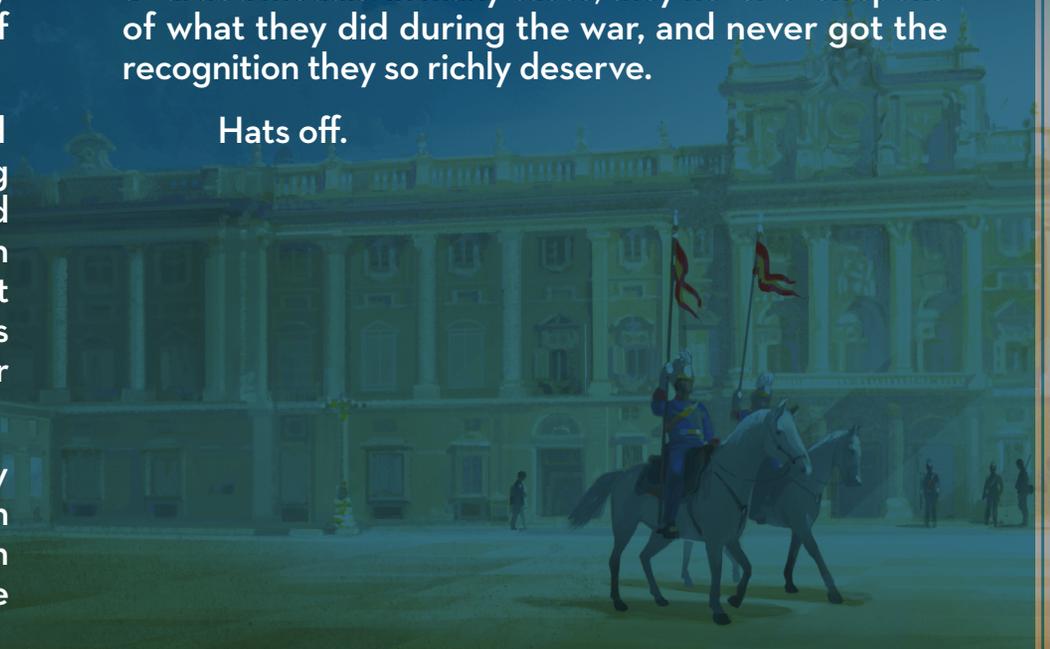
Kim Philby (eventually revealed to be a Soviet spy and one of the infamous "Cambridge Five") really did train SOE agents, and oversaw British espionage on the Iberian peninsula. His own memoir, written in Russia after he

escaped Britain—*My Silent War: The Autobiography of a Spy*—was an excellent resource.

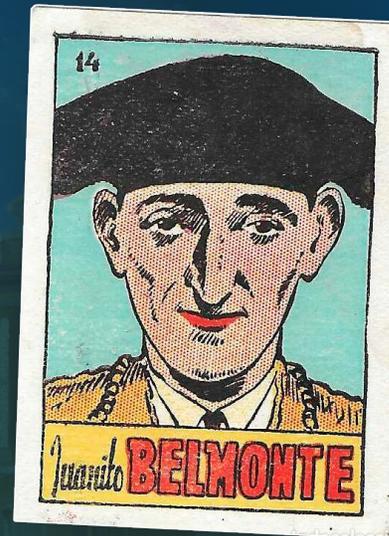
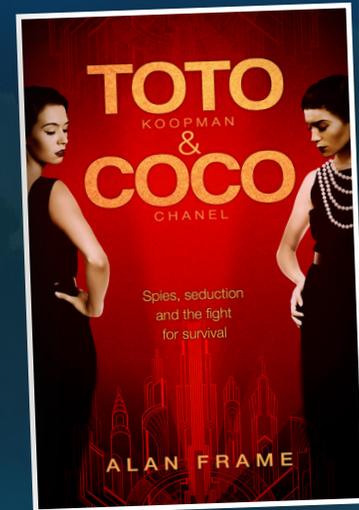
In my imagination, Maggie Hope, along with John, David, Sarah, Chuck, Griffin, Freddie, and Mr. K. (of course), all make it to V.E. Day and beyond. I've always had the final image of the series in mind—Buckingham Palace during the victory celebrations, with the prime minister and royal family out on the balcony, waving to the crowd. And, out of sight and behind them, Maggie, John, David, Sarah, Peter Frain, and so many of the people who worked behind the scenes to help the Allies win.

So many real people did toil anonymously, many giving their health, their sanity, their very lives to save democracy and the free world. Most were never awarded medals. In many cases, they never even spoke of what they did during the war, and never got the recognition they so richly deserve.

Hats off.



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