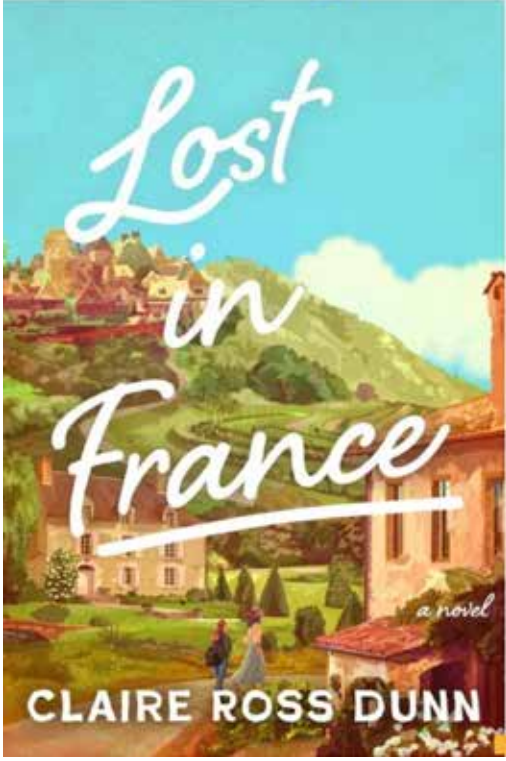


transcript



Claire Ross Dunn talks publishing, marketing, and



BANANAS

I would like a piece of bananas, thank you very much.

IMPERFECT conversations

Lauren O'Malley:

In imperfect fashion, we're starting again. This time I pressed record.  
Hey, Claire, how's it going?

Claire Ross Dunn:

Hi, Lauren. Good, thanks.

LO: Good. So yeah, I'm going to pretend we didn't just spend 15 minutes talking, which I forgot to record. Yeah, very imperfect. I'm very true to my brand.

CRD: I love that. Alright!

LO: So here's Claire Ross Dunn. Claire and I know each other from childhood. Yeah, we went to school together as little tiny tots right up into, I think, early adolescence, at which point I made a sharp left, and I believe, Claire, you stayed on at the Toronto French School, correct?

CRD: I did, I did.

LO: Okay, and survived.

CRD: Yeah, like a full... a lifer. JK to grade 13, there was a grade 13 back then.

LO: Right. And so then there was a very long gap in our friendship and it was recently rekindled when a little bug, I think it must have been a little writing sprite got into my brain and said, 'Look up that Claire Ross Dunn and see what she's up to these days.' So I did, and I think it was via LinkedIn and saw that you'd written a novel, and with some trepidation, I got that novel from the library

CRD: I love that.

LO: thinking if this is good, yay, we'll connect, and if it's bad, well, I'll just keep on trucking without Claire in my life.

CRD: Right?

LO: And the good news is that it was a really lovely book. At last count moved me in a lot of different ways. The birds, the mental health aspects, dealing with obsessive compulsive disorder, and dealing with that really nicely, really respectfully and, realistically, I appreciated that a lot. And also, it's funny and charming and sweet, and then... and there's a little romance in there, too.

CRD: I love her. Great.

LO: And some lovely, obviously beautiful writing as well. The cherry on top. And now you've written another novel, your second. Is it your second novel or are there others?

CRD: It is my second novel. Yeah, no, there are no more novels in the drawer. *At last count* sat in the drawer for a long time, like, 8 years, long time.

LO: Oh, wow, okay. All right. So tell us all about *Lost in France*

CRD: *Lost in France* is a romance, like a full-on romance this time. I think *at last count* was much more of a combination of romance, but also, like, a coming-of-age tale for adults. *Lost in France* is about this woman, Marlo, who lives in Toronto. She works for a film festival here. She's overworked, underpaid, is kind of doing the daily churn, the daily grind, and is feeling quite lost in her life. And she's a single mom to an 18-year-old, Sabine, who is graduating from high school with 100%, but also feels lost. So this mother duo are feeling lost. And Marlo goes to her daughter's graduation... high school graduation party, gets drunk. Doom scrolls Facebook, sees an article about these one-euro houses that you can buy in Europe? And, uh, when she wakes up in the morning, she realizes she's bought it. And that there are all these rules and regulations and no online refunds. So, Marlo and Sabine go to France to sort it all out.

They deal with the intractable civil servant. The House is very rundown, but very charming. And, um, they decide to stay the summer and, you know, clean it up to flip it in case their appeal for a refund doesn't work out. And of course, they both fall in love. And they decide to stay at the end of the book.

So, when I pitch this book, I talk about it being kind of like *Bridget Jones goes to France*, or *Bridget Jones meets Under the Tuscan Sun*. Um, or *Gilmore Girls* go to France. So it's like a lighter novel than *At Last Count*, it's got that same kind of funny, sad, and wise vibe, which I would say is my brand. You talk about your brand being imperfect, and that has kind of been identified as my brand.

LO: Funny, sad, and wise. That's cool, I like that.

CRD: Yeah, it is an amazing thing. Um, I worked for a producer, I don't know, like, 20 years ago. And we'd worked on a couple of projects together, and she said, well, of course, all of your writing is funny, sad, and wise. I felt like I'd been hit by a boulder. It was like somebody who knew me in a professional circumstance, but, I mean, we were friendly, but not really friends. [She] actually saw right through me, and saw the, like, the core elements of me. So... yeah, I do think that that's my brand, actually.

LO: That's... I find that very... I just put my marketing hat on accidentally and just started thinking about that as a brand, and it's, there's so many things you can do with that that can be really, fun and powerful, and that, hopefully we can talk about that another time, and that can help make your branding a little... or your marketing a little less onerous and a little more fun.

CRD: Oh, God, please, yes.

LO: Just those guidelines. So *Bridget Jones meets under the Tuscan Sun*, and *Gilmore Girls* go to

France. Those are pretty powerhouse,

CRD: Yeah. There's the book cover.

LO: Ta-da!

CRD: Yep, powerhouse... powerhouse kind of taglines?

LO: Yeah, beautiful. Pretty powerful. So comps, you know, as one gets into writing and publishing, one learns that comps are key. How did you make a list of those comps when you were pitching this? Did your agent help you with that? How did that go?

CRD: Yeah, that's a really good question. I... I don't think that I... I think it's a bit, uh, half and half that you start writing because you're inter... you're in the middle of this story, and as it emerges on the page, you start to think, oh, it's a little bit like that. It's a little bit like this. And as you know, I have worked in TV for 30 years, so comps are also a huge thing in television. And you're always kind of doing this dance between, um... people want comps, so they... nobody wants something too original. So they want comps, but you can't be too much like those things, or they will say it's totally unoriginal, so somewhere in the middle, you're trying to find the good middle ground so that people feel they're watching something that they can identify and know and hang on to, but also that you've got something that's unique about your story.

LO: It's funny you say that, because I just... I heard an interview with the writer of *Widow's Bay*. It's a new show on Apple, and she also was a writer at *Parks and Rec*. I'm sorry, I don't remember her name, but she wrote *Ghostbusters*, the female version, and a Melissa McCarthy one that was... I had never even heard of that apparently was just a huge blockbuster. Anyway, she was saying when she pitched *Widow's Bay* to Apple, she decided to just go with, it's not like anything else out there

CRD: Wow.

LO: And she said, what was the expression? They bought it in the room.

CRD: Oh, yes, well, which happens in LA all the time.

LO: Yeah.

CRD: That never happens in Canada, ever.

LO: Okay, interesting.

CRD: Just to... just so that we never expect that. But yeah, in LA, usually they will buy or pass on a project before you've hit the parking lot.

LO: Right.

CRD: Yeah. Yeah. But you know, I mean, if I had written the female version of Ghostbusters and a Melissa McCarthy blockbuster, maybe I too could say it's like nothing else.

LO: Wow, that would be nice.

CRD: But usually, the thought is, especially with newer writers, if you say it's like nothing else, you're asked to go again, like... go home and, like, go for a walk and think about that a bit more, because there should be some kind of... Like, when I work with a newer writer, and we start developing... help... I'm helping develop their pitch into a Bible, or something like that, I ask them for comps, or what I used to call tonal references, which is kind of more accurate in a way, right? Because you're asking for the... what's the tone that you're trying to get to? What... what do you want audiences to feel when they're... when they're watching your show, or your movie, or in our case, reading your book. Um, and it's a very practical tool. Once they identify... well, it's kind of like this. Then the two of us can go away and watch a bunch of those episodes and come back, and now we create common language for one another. Like, we are like, oh, right, it's kind of like this, it makes me feel that. She, the lead goes on this kind of journey, and... you know, the audience is, like anything, elated, worried, intrigued, scared. Um, so it... it goes to a conversation about genre and tone, and setting, and all these things. So all these things, interesting things, emerge out of that conversation. So yeah, and I'm learning that comps are also a big thing in the publishing industry, and it's new for me to figure out how to do the marketing for a book. I'm much less... I feel like I'm, you know, I don't know, wandering around in the dark a bit, and just trying to look at other writers I think I'm like, and then see what they are doing to market their books, and mimic that... mimic that to a certain extent.

LO: So tell me a little bit about what you are doing to market your book. What are you trying? What are you enjoying? What are you hating?

CRD: Do you have an hour? Um...

LO: Yeah.

CRD: Yeah, okay, so baseline, I will just say that I... I... As you know, I hate the promo, but I don't think I'm alone in that. Um, I resent the time that it takes away from writing. In a perfect world, I would just be in my beautiful office writing and writing, and there would be a...

LO: Well, isn't that the thinking we have as writers, we picture that you're in your smoking jacket with your sherry and you're just like clickety clacking away or with your fancy Mont Blanc pen and your minions

CRD: That's right. And there's... we have minions. Who... yeah.

LO: ...the big traditional publishing firm, and your agent, and all of their people, all of those little,

you know, 18-year-old interns are working away on it, and in fact, that's not the case at all.

CRD: That's right. It's not the case at all. I mean, it's a combination of... we don't have to get into all the reasons why it's not the case, some of them make sense, some of them are just, uh... a product of, um... publishing houses not having enough staff. Like, there's a contraction in the industry, they have to reduce their staff, they've got a tight team to promote, you know, a whole season of books, not just your book. So, they're depending on you to have followers, and to grow your...the people who are interested in your book, and they recognize that they cannot reach those specific people, you can. You're the person who's connected to those people. You know, on social media platforms and the internet and whatnot, through your newsletter. So, they're asking you to take that chunk. While they do things that you, um... that I can't do, like... a Barnes & Noble giveaway. That is something that my, publisher, Alcove Press has taken care of. I wouldn't even know how to do that thing. They have the relationship with Barnes & Noble, I don't.

Um, so, yeah, so I'm working on a newslet- my newsletter, trying to grow the readership for that, um...

I just kicked off my promo squad, so my book comes out June 23rd, which is, like, 3 weeks away. Um, and I just...assembled a promo squad, which is like a group of your family and friends who will do very small tasks between now and launch day that can help, kind of, get the word out to their networks and whatnot.

Um, what else am I doing? I'm doing, you know, podcast interviews, and...

LO: And who arranges this? So you had a publicist for a little while, is that right?

CRD: Yeah, I had a publicist for a little while, like, I had hoped that having somebody working with me independently would help not only promote *Lost in France*, but also, *At Last Count*. Like, in theory, there's a... what's the term, you know, uh, the, um... not a tidal wave, but the thing that comes after a boat, like the slipstream? That's the word I think I'm looking for, where, you know, *Lost In France* is now being promoted, so there's an opportunity to promote *At Last Count* as well.

Um, and uh... anyway, I'm continuing to do that work on my own, and yes, the team at Alcove is working hard. They're doing a bunch of things. So, in theory, the two things together should lift the book.

LO: Yeah, let it be known. We are not looking to slam any traditional publishers in any way, shape, or form

CRD: No, goodness, no.

LO: So in terms of... so you have guested on a bunch of podcasts, which you've found in a number

of different ways. You have assembled your promo squad, you've got your newsletter. So, for example, when you approach to publisher when your agent approached a publisher. I hear all kinds of things about how it used to be for a while, and I didn't know how long ago this was, that they would... they would only take on authors who had X number of followers on Instagram, and so on. And then I heard... I have heard rumors that that has shifted, and now it's more they want to know that you have an audience for a newsletter

CRD: Yeah.

LO: Do you have any... can you dispel or confirm any of that?

CRD: I think both those things are true. Like, they would be much happier with me if I had 100,000 followers. I don't. Newsflash, I don't. But, yeah, they at least want to know that you have your ducks in a row. So, you must have an author website. You must have a newsletter, you must be on Instagram and Facebook and Bluesky. Must you? Uh, I mean... You should be on at least one of those platforms, the platform that you're comfortable with. But the author website and newsletter are must-haves, and so when I was getting ready to launch at last count. Oh my goodness, my hair was on fire, you know, because I didn't have an author website, and so I was doing all that stuff of, like, writing all the copy, assembling all the photos, figuring out all the things, you know, and I'm not... I'm not a Luddite, but nor am I a tech, uh, bro, so... I'm somewhere in the middle there. And, um, you know, so I got a younger person than I to, uh, put it onto Squarespace. But I wrote all the text and whatnot.

And, um, and then just getting a newsletter organized and, like, a reader magnet, all these things were brand new, so I was constantly, like, pouring over articles on the internet about how to do all that thing, what are the best practices? It is overwhelming. I think you can start with, you know, not to freak anybody out here. But, you can start with a very simple website, and then, like, an about page and a book page, and a contact me page. That would be fine. And...

LO: Totally agree. Yeah.

CRD: You build out from there.

LO: Yeah. What about BookTock that we hear so much about? Have you had any experience, right?

CRD: Oh my god. Well, I roll my eyes because TikTok is the one thing I can't... I... I... for me, at the moment, I won't say never. But for me, it feels like a bridge too far, like I'm on Instagram and Facebook, and I have a Facebook author page, um, that also, by the way, is a good idea. Um, and I'm on Bluesky, but not as frequently. Uh, and I'm on LinkedIn, but not as frequently. Yep, you know, just like the book, um, TikTok is a whole other thing, even how you scroll through it is a new thing. And so, um...

LO: So it feels like a bridge too far because it's yet another thing and a format you're not all that

familiar with and comfortable with. Is that right?

CRD: Yeah, exactly. Um, the dilemma, though, is that there are all these sort of mythic stories now about how romance authors in particular have gone bananas on TikTok. And I would like a piece of bananas, thank you very much. Um, so I, I keep wondering about that. Um, my son, my 25-year-old son, is coming home in a convenient two and a half weeks, and my book launches in 3 weeks. And so, you know, like, that's a thing that I could really use his help with, he's on that platform. I don't think he posts very much, but he is very familiar with it. And just to say, like, could we do an experiment together where... You help me post every day for a month. That's all I'm asking, like, let's just see if it moves the needle.

Um, I will say it's probably for another conversation that there is a particular kind of way that romance authors promote their books on TikTok, which is very intriguing. Like, I've attended two webinars that explain this sort of system of posting that seems to have, uh get a very high viewership, or likes, or shares, or whatever it is. Um, so I would love to test that.

LO: I love that idea of an experiment. And I wonder, I mean, you can go viral on any platform, and that doesn't mean you're selling any more books.

CRD: Right.

LO: Is that... is that the priority in all of your marketing? Is it awareness? Is it sales? Is it, you know, to pave the way for the next books in the series, or for a TV series, or any of those things, or all of the above?

CRD: Yeah. Well, I... I... this is a terrible answer to that question, but it's all those things. Um, awareness for sure, because as we just said, like, I did an interview with a bookstore podcast about 3 weeks ago, maybe, uh, the Poison Pen bookstore in the United States. And they... I think they traditionally did, like, murder mystery mysteries, but they've expanded into romance, so it's... it's got a big following. And the publisher, quite smartly, put me and another published, uh, author from that same publisher together, because we both have a thing of renovating old houses in the book, right? So it was... they had joined us in a kind of a marketing idea of, like, If you like books about renovating old houses, flipping them, whatever. These two books could be for you.

LO: Cool.

CRD: Anyway, uh, that author, Jennifer O'Brien, who wrote a book called *The Summer I Found You*, uh, a beach read, *Total Beach Read*. Um... She has 80,000 followers on Instagram. And, uh, would I like to have 80,000 followers on Instagram? Yes, I would. Only because of the visibility, like you said, of visibility and awareness, right? So there's that. Uh, would I love to sell a kabillion copies of *Lost in France*? Oh. Gorgeous! That would be a dream. Um, especially because I want to turn it into a book series, um... And so, the viability of books 2, 3, 4, 5 depend on how well book one sells, you know, and hopefully other things, hopefully not just

that thing, but, uh, you know, that's... I'm sure that that's part of the equation, um, when the publisher evaluates it, so I want book one to do well, and so it... it requires these things, right? Like, awareness, getting more followers putting out a consistent newsletter... All those things.

LO: I just had a total crash in my brain with too many ideas, but one was wondering about when you did this interview in conjunction with Jennifer O'Brien. Is that right?

CRD: Yeah, yeah.

LO: Did you find, did your numbers on your platform go up at all, having been exposed to her audience?

CRD: Um... I did not notice that particularly, like, maybe a couple, and she was absolutely lovely, and, like, um, you know, um, posted a few times about my book, and enjoying my book and whatnot. Um, what I did notice was... oh, maybe a week ago, the publisher ran a giveaway on Instagram. And in order to get your name put in the hat for the giveaway, you had to follow me. And follow me on Instagram and put something in the chat about whether you'd been to France or not, I think, was the thing. And so, yeah, I saw a marked bump for that. Um, so that's... that's an idea that's kind of stuck with me about how you run a giveaway that gets people to... or how you do anything that gets people to need to follow you, you know?

LO: Interesting, which I don't like to advocate because I feel like it's pressuring people, forcing them to do something. Whereas I do strongly agree with the concept of sharing audiences and crossover marketing and that kind of thing.

CD Yeah.

LO: In terms of, like, I was thinking about book series, it struck me that there's such a popular thing right now. It's really not my thing at all, but I'm curious, I'm wondering, and this is not necessarily, well, maybe it is to do with marketing. My immediate thought was we're in time, we're in really troubled times, things are overwhelming, so people search for comfort in characters they're familiar with and storylines they recognize. Do you think that's it? Is there more to it?

CRD: Yeah. I think that's a huge part of it. Um, you know how people re-watch comfort TV, like...

LO: Yeah, I don't, but my daughter does and it just blows my mind. Yeah.

CRD: Yeah, like, I know people who, watch... just re-watch Downton Abbey. Over and over again, or re... like, my son Emmett rewatched The Office, the entire nine seasons of it or something.

LO: Yep, Hazel. Yeah, Hazel did that, and Gilmore Girls. Yeah

CRD: Yeah, Gilmore Girls, it's... it is comforting, and in Lost in France, like every, um, classic ro-

mance, there's a happily ever after. Um, and it is kind of dreamy. There's something aspirational about the idea of quitting hustle culture, which was also part of the idea of the book.

Um, you know, like people just saying, I've had enough of the rat race. Like, there are a lot of cliches, but they're cliches for a reason, right? Like, quitting the rat race, the corporate ladder, um, hustle culture, and just exiting all of that. And kind of reinventing yourself.

So this one euro house idea, where you go to France, and it's actually attainable. It's not part of the insane housing prices in Toronto or around the world. It's like, we could all afford a one euro house, and then take it all down a notch and, um, have more time to drink red wine and eat baguette, and you know...

LO: Cheese, yeah. So if there's if there's a happily ever after in this, and please obviously I'm not asking you to divulge any spoilers, but

CRD: So much cheese.

LO: Where does Book 2 is there trouble in Paradise?

CRD: No, it's less trouble in paradise than, um... she decides to go back, which I don't think is a... is a spoiler, because obviously if there's going to be a book series called *Lost in France*, she has to go there and stay lost. Um, but yeah, so she gets an idea of how she could stay. And, uh, and, you know, she ends up kind of the de facto mayor in this tiny, underpopulated village. So, if we're to talk about a series arc, which is a term that I know well from television series, and transported into the book world. Her book arc will be, how do I repopulate this village.

LO: I did a terrible I did you a terrible injustice in not introducing you with your full background, but I will put that, and I'll link to that link to your information.

CRD: No, no, that's fine. I said that I worked in television, so... yeah. And I've written a few of these, um, Hallmark romance movies for streaming, and so... it was part of what led me to write *Lost in France*, because I started to really understand the mechanics of writing romance, and thought it would be so great to write, to take the time to write that in a book and pour more of my funny, sad, and wise into a book where I can really explore my own author voice, then...

In these movies where you're really adhering to the broadcaster's kind of tone. The tone is the broadcaster's tone, right? As opposed to in books, where a book by me is my tone.

LO: Is there a part of you that yearns to write an art book, like a book that doesn't adhere to structures or popularities or anything else that just

CRD: Hmm. No.

LO: Good, cool.

CRD: Uh, I don't... I mean, I don't think so. I'm not a radical... Um, you know, um, this book has no three-act structure. I'm in love with the three-act structure. I'm in... I'm a... I'm considered a structure hound, and in television, that often was my role in the room, like, writers are hired for their particular strengths in a room. And so, my strength was almost always structure. So I'm, like, a deep addict of all the structure books, you know. Um, Hero's Journey, um,

LO: Save the Cat

CRD: Save the cat, Elephant Box, which is a book about writing, um, structuring sitcom, and yeah, all those things, I find that deeply interesting. So, I love structure, and I suspect anything I write will always have quite a classic kind of 3- or 4-act structure to it. But it doesn't mean that it can't be original, right? Like... Yeah, it's about what you pour into that vessel, in a way.

LO: Claire, I could talk to you for... we were going to do this for 10 minutes, and I think we've already been at least 20, so I'm sorry to take up too much of your time, but

CRD: No, it's so much fun.

LO: Yeah, it's a delight. And yeah, as like I said, I have a million more questions I could ask, but I think we better leave it there. Is there anything I didn't ask or anything you'd like to add or anything, any little marketing tip or marketing yourself that you

CRD: I don't think so. Marketing tip: stick with it. I think it's my marketing tip. Take a deep breath, do one marketing thing, and then weed the garden, and then do another marketing thing, and then give yourself 15 minutes on Netflix. And then do another marketing thing, and then, you know, go for a walk. That's... that's been the only way that I can manage the load.

LO: And I said I didn't have any more questions, and I do have one more. Your promo squad

CRD: Yeah.

LO: Of which I'm a proud member. Did you do this with At Last Count as well, or is this the first time?

CRD: Yes. I did. I did, yeah. There are very... there are lots of articles that people can read online about Promo Squad. Sometimes they're called Launch Team. Uh, street team, I think? Sounds way cooler. And promo... well, I'm a promo squad's pretty, pretty cool, too.

LO: Street team sounds like they're out there hassling people with, I don't know, some kind of questionnaires or something. I feel like

CRD: Right, right, right. Um, so yeah, there, you know, for other authors who might see this who are interested in that, there are lots of articles about how to build a promo squad, what to ask of them, and usually it's like a series of maybe 4 or 5 emails over the course of a month, where

you ask them to do small tasks that increase your reach online. Nothing onerous, but like, buy the book, borrow it at the library, follow me on all the platforms. Can you post a review once you've read the book, um... Because all of those things have to do with algorithms, these mysterious algorithms, and you're trying to just get some good traction as you enter. You know, they say that you've got something like 6 weeks, to essentially promote your book before it turns into ever so slightly backlist, which is a terrifying notion. Um, so you're trying to make the best of those 6 weeks that you can.

And then, of course, you... you... you tell yourself not to give up, and to just keep trying to find book clubs and podcasts and other ways to promote your book. Apply for prizes and things like that, but to extend that six weeks on.

LO: Right?

CRD: Yeah.

LO: That's such good advice, because I actually have another client who was on the—I have a client who was on the Globe and Mail bestseller list for five weeks, and then, yeah, and then hit that wall and was overwhelmed with, you know, like, fried from having done that, and then, you know, how do you maintain the momentum? You can't maintain the same momentum, so how do you

CRD: Oh. Yeah. Yes.

LO: Start a new momentum, how do you do new things?

CRD: Well, and this would be something that you would have lots of advice about, I'm sure. Because it's its own thing. It's like all these things that we've been talking about, en place, you know what I mean? Like... what... what else are you... how else are you going to lift this over the fence once you've been to all the the places on the initial list. What else is there?

LO: Yeah.

CRD: Um, you know, an *At Last Count*, for example, is, it was 4 years ago this month that that published. And to me, it kind of feels like yesterday, but... Um, I recognize that there's an opportunity to help that book again, and so I'm trying to figure out creative ways to do that. And I... but I can't steal thunder from *Lost in France*, so what are the ways that I can pair them up, or...

LO: Yeah.

CRD: Yeah, it's interesting.

LO: Hmm. Yeah, sorry, I just went into marketing. I was going to give you a list of ideas, but we'll do that another time. And I will finally let you go and thank you so much for this. I think you

provided a lot of really great insights and ideas for people who are starting out or

CRD: Oh my goodness.

LO: Moving along and it was just such a delight speaking with you. Thank you so much for this. I really appreciate your time.

CRD: Same, same.

LO: Thanks.

CLAIRE ROSS DUNN  
*author of award-winning* *At Last Count* *and upcoming* *Lost In France*

IMPER  
FECT  
*conject*  
*sations*

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