

C H A P T E R I

A FORCE TO BE
RECKONED WITH

Kim Moses never thought women would transform her life. She was already a force in blockbuster TV, producing and directing shows that won six Emmys and two Golden Globes. And she'd spent her early career in sports, after following her high school sweetheart—a football prodigy named Joe Montana—to Notre Dame. Now she had a loving husband and business partner, plus two teenage sons. Needless to say, Moses was accustomed to being the only woman in the room.

“Girl power” sounded lovely if chimerical, the province of utopian theorists. Women who'd spent enough time in the workforce knew better than to pine for some refuge of feminine support. It just wasn't part of Moses's reality—until she found herself at the center of The Vault.

The Vault isn't some secret society. It has no charter or clubhouse or rules. It's just a bunch of ladies gathering for dinner, at each other's homes, no less. But these gals happen to be tops in their fields, and in 2009, Moses had an urge to bring them together.

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As cofounder of Sander/Moses Productions and Slam, a digital media company, Moses knew that go-getting women existed in C-suites and conference rooms, on mastheads and boards of directors. Yet they were tucked away in offices or zipping around on planes, and after work they ran home to care for their families. They weren't being seen, or seeing much of each other. So Moses called her friend Willow Bay, a television correspondent and *Huffington Post* editor, to suggest they assemble some busy women for a meal.

Large conferences didn't breed intimacy, but dinner at one another's houses just might.

Moses and Bay had been to hundreds of formal networking events, and they grasped the importance of a filter. Large conferences didn't breed intimacy, but dinner at one another's houses just might. They wanted their group to be personal, not just business, and they hoped women would open up and forge friendships among equals. They contacted some women they knew and others they'd never met, targeting experts across a variety of industries, gals sure to possess an array of strategies and viewpoints. "I wanted to connect with women who had climbed and discovered and figured it out, instead of inheriting something. It's a different journey," Moses says. "I wanted to meet women who could tell their stories."

And Moses had a rags-to-riches tale of her own.

Life Was Not a Spectator Sport

Finding women she could relate to was especially important for Moses because she'd succeeded without ever having role models. She was raised in a poor coal-mining town in southwest Pennsylvania,

a town with “good souls” but few options. There were three ways a woman could go: nurse, teacher, or wife. Men were athletes, or they ended up on welfare or in jail. Nobody went to college. “There was nothing to aspire to and no one to show you the way,” she says. “My brothers and I were the few who went out into the world and didn’t go back there.”

Moses left home at age 19 to marry Montana and move to Indiana, where she worked in the Sports Information Office at Notre Dame while her husband began his rise toward the Hall of Fame. She loved live sports, but when the pair separated during Montana’s senior year, Moses was abruptly shown the door. “We were a high-profile couple. They’d won the national championship, and Notre Dame made it clear they wanted me to move on. It was awkward for them,” she says. “I was very hurt because I had worked hard and really felt I stood on my own. There were no women there and I had no one to turn to.”

Moses followed a Notre Dame friend to Washington, D.C., where she labored in the trenches on Capitol Hill. There she saw at least a few women with power, women with ideas and opinions who, instead of just cheerleading from the sidelines, worked together with men toward common goals. She began putting herself through Georgetown, and she used her wits and gumption to score a spot with Al Gore supporting his efforts to halt climate change, but Moses saw that without a law degree, her Washington career would be limited. Plus, she wanted to follow her passion, and that meant sticking to sports.

Through family members and former colleagues at Notre Dame, Moses secured connections to ABC Sports and the NFL. She pursued projects when Congress went on hiatus several times a year, working on production teams at both college and professional

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levels, covering everything from bowling to basketball, not to mention nine Super Bowls and the 1984 Olympics.

It was the 1980s, the Reagan Administration, and determined career girls were just starting to appear in the media, if as sexless, strident caricatures brandishing their *noms de guerre*. Sigourney Weaver sparred with Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*, while in *Baby Boom*, Diane Keaton's "Tiger Lady" struggled to manage her ambition and an adopted daughter. All wore Reeboks over nude hose, shoulder pads over thick skin. Life, they were told, was not a spectator sport.

Even so, Moses worked with all men. Few arenas were more male-dominated than government and athletics, and often it felt like she'd left one locker room for another. "The Hill and then ABC and NBC Sports, it was a wild, rowdy group of guys. When you're in a man's world, it's really loud, noisy, and aggressive. I hadn't seen any women I wanted to be, whose job I wanted to have," she says. "Trying to find your voice is hard if you haven't seen someone else do it."

But Moses had drive and talent. She knew she could be successful, even in sports, if only someone would give her a chance. She started sending letters to sports producers in New York and Los Angeles. Finally, she received an offer from a Notre Dame graduate who worked for Don Ohlmeyer, a producer who'd expanded to mainstream entertainment and was now running his own shop. She ditched Georgetown and D.C. to join him.

Moses traveled frequently with Ohlmeyer Productions, and when she returned from one month-long trip to Florida for a Disney special, she found a new producer—Ian Sander—sitting across the hall. Sander was working with Ohlmeyer on a movie, and he and Moses became fast friends. They began dating three months

later, once he'd left the firm, and about eight months into their romance, Moses brought him *Stolen Babies*.

Stolen Babies, a 1993 primetime drama on Lifetime television, starred Mary Tyler Moore, who won an Emmy for her performance. The film marked the beginning of a personal and professional collaboration for Sander and Moses that has lasted twenty years and garnered countless awards. The couple is now married, and together they own a production company known for its use of cutting-edge technology. In the mid-1990s, they produced *Profiler*, the first show to leverage the Internet to cultivate fans, and when it came time for their most recent hit, *Ghost Whisperer*—the CBS drama starring Jennifer Love Hewitt—they took everything they'd learned about digital platforms and started generating buzz well before the program aired. They organized events and fashioned an online crystal ball game, a graphic novel, video games, and a Web series from a ghost's point of view. Or, as Moses says, they created a 360-degree “total engagement experience” to nurture a base of devoted female followers.

Their marketing blitz worked. *Ghost Whisperer* averaged 10 million viewers its first season, more than any other Friday night show in 2005, and ran for five years. But for Moses, the fact that her show was built around a strong woman was as important as its overall success. “We were poised to have staying power, and we were the number one most talked about show online,” she says. “We built *Ghost Whisperer* into a powerful brand with a women at the core. I learned I was able to drive ratings with a predominantly female audience and build a loyal fan base and a powerhouse brand, all around a female role model.”

Realizing the strength of her female brand set Moses thinking. She'd left the sausage-fest of sports and politics, and still she was

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surrounded by guys. She recalled a time years before, when she'd found herself sitting across from a bigwig at CBS, interviewing for a job she knew she could nail. She'd expressed her love of producing, revealed her background and need to support herself, and then she was floored by this man's hidebound response. "He said, 'You will never, ever work for a network because you don't have a college education,'" Moses says, still smarting. "The idea that this guy could step on my dream made me go after it more aggressively."

Now she was a big-time producer for the most prestigious networks, and she knew her shows were making an impact. So, she wondered, how is it possible—when women are the dominant viewers of network TV—that there aren't more female decision makers in the field?

"Even in Hollywood I didn't have a true infrastructure of women who understood where I was. There are a lot of women in middle management, but mostly it's men making decisions and filtering the material," Moses says. "While some programming is a science, some is taste. It's intuitive. If you're at ESPN, you don't see so many women because women aren't the primary watchers of sports. At Univision, there aren't a lot of white people programming because it caters to Hispanics. But when I look at the women's networks, there are still very few women doing creative work."

If this were true in her industry, where women are major consumers, then what was it like in other professions?

Moses wanted the chance to meet smart, determined women like herself, but she knew it wouldn't be easy. The gals she sought were already operating on overdrive, constantly flinging themselves across continents in pursuit of fulfillment, a quest for some greater piece of the pie. So she and Willow Bay were stunned when they reached out and, without fail, every woman said yes, and they were

elated when a core group of about a dozen—including the founders of Juicy Couture, the co-owner of the L.A. Sparks WNBA team, and one of the few female cardiothoracic surgeons in the world—began to gel. “They didn’t know these other women,” Moses says, “but they found the idea very empowering.”

“Being with these women, reaching out to others, we all end up talking about our personal stories and life journeys. It’s pure magic and we’re moved out of our universe for a couple of hours.”—Kim Moses

These ladies have met monthly for the past three years, and Moses is always there to greet them when they arrive. “They’ve had heavy days, long days, and there’s such a look of excitement and anticipation,” she continues. “Each time, new information comes out or something special opens up. It’s never the same thing. Being with these women, reaching out to others, we all end up talking about our personal stories and life journeys. It’s pure magic and we’re moved out of our universe for a couple of hours.”

The women call their cabal The Vault because they’ve come to truly know and trust each other. Everyone contributes and everyone is discreet, and they’ve learned that, like Moses, each one is self-made. “We talk about everything from employee issues to problems we’re having with our husbands. It’s not in the PTA-coffee klatch kind of way, but more sharing points of view on where the world is heading, what’s happening to kids in our communities,” Moses says. “It’s having women at the table, talking and sharing and helping us figure out where to go next.”

Moses and Bay invite special guests to ensure that each dinner has a distinctive slant and feels unique. Visitors, of course, aren’t

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just any seat-fillers. They're women like Leslie Sanchez, the Republican political analyst; Judy Smith, a Washington, D.C. – based crisis manager (with clients like Monica Lewinsky) who inspired the ABC hit show *Scandal*; Nicole Feld, half of the first sister-team to produce Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus; Dr. Helene Gayle, the president and CEO of CARE USA, the world's leading international humanitarian organization; and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, the Pakistani-Canadian filmmaker who won a 2012 Oscar for her documentary, *Saving Face*. Not a slouch in this bunch.

“It's opened my world way beyond the industry I've worked in. I feel like I'd been asleep before I started this group,” Moses expands. “Most of us are very insular, but we're living in a world that is dynamically connected and this is the most incredible time to come together. We all know we're going to learn something and help each other.”

While there was never any express purpose, no desire to shake down other chicks for their contacts, Vault members have found that when you put a bunch of motivated ladies in the same room, exciting things happen. The women have counseled each other through job transitions, formed strategic collaborations, and facilitated book deals. In one instance, when filmmaker Chinoy mentioned her desire to create an animated series for Pakistani youth to convey the Taliban's negative influence, Moses introduced her to another gal in the Vault constellation, Darla Anderson. Anderson is the top female at Pixar, a company known for films like *Toy Story*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Cars*, and she holds the Guinness World Record for the highest average movie gross of any producer. “You couldn't ask for a more valuable mentor than Darla for Sharmeen,” Moses says. “All this happens just through these dinners. When we put

people together and say, ‘Can you help this woman?’ everyone in our group says ‘Yes, absolutely.’ It’s amazing.”

And though The Vault was never meant to be self-serving, Moses has benefited personally in spectacular ways. Vault ladies keep Moses’s thinking current and serve as sources for her annual “Point of View” document, a 200-page analysis of the economy and culture used to buttress content she’s creating for TV and digital media the following year. Moses also partnered with her friend and fellow Vault member Veronika Kwan-Rubinek, who is president of international distribution at Warner Bros. Pictures, on an outreach program for the international opening of Clint Eastwood’s 2010 movie *Hereafter*.

“I had just done *Ghost Whisperer*, which was about mediums, so I knew her audience. I thought I could help,” Moses says. “Because we had our shows airing in 169 countries, we digitally reached out to our fan base. We engaged with people we thought would be interested in this fare—in this case, mediums and talking to the dead. We drove those eyeballs and got them to the movie theaters.” The collaboration was so effective that Kwan-Rubinek hired Sander/Moses to create an app for *Happy Feet 2*. It was the most downloaded app in the history of Warner Bros.

“These things happen organically in an informal way, but they also happen formally at the table. We’re constantly thinking about what we can do for each other. By the end of every dinner, we all have something we can do to further somebody else,” says Moses, high from the sale of new shows to ABC and CBS. “I’ve always had a problem asking for help, but this isn’t like making a cold call. You may be the one asking for help today, but tomorrow you’re the one who’s giving help. Today I bet I fielded four calls from women who were sent to me by somebody else. Times have changed and

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women are in a position to help each other and make a difference. There's momentum now, and we're stitched together tighter."

North to the Future

The Vault has been a revelation for Moses, upending a prevailing view of high-powered women in the workplace. "Tiger ladies" aren't meant to have generous spirits. They're supposed to claw each other's eyes out, stab each other in the back. How else could they have climbed corporate ladders and not just survived, but thrived?

The Vault was always different, perhaps—Moses thought—exceptional. It had to be the result of a rare and secret chemistry. Moses believed she'd found a singular recipe, a pocket of warmth in a kitchen in a house in a tough town called L.A. She never imagined this formula could be replicated or that groups like hers were coalescing in other cities. She never believed women could be uniting across industries, offering support and sounding boards, fueling each other's journeys and providing safe landings in places as far-flung as Anchorage, Alaska.

But women were coming together in Anchorage too, as Liane Pelletier can attest. She found them once she mustered the courage to venture, as the Alaska state motto says, "North to the Future," to become a CEO.

Pelletier hadn't known she wanted to be a chief executive until she said it aloud, onstage and in public. Because she was one of few women leaders at Sprint, the telecom giant based in Overland Park, Kansas, she routinely won a featured speaking slot at the company's annual "Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work" event. So, on a spring day in 2000, Pelletier ascended to the dais without papers or props to tell Sprint employees and their children why she loved her profession.

Pelletier led the corporate strategy and business development group and—together with her 100-person team, many of whom had PhDs—she kept her finger on the pulse of the telecom industry, tracking trends, competitors, and emerging regulations to position her firm for success. “We were the brainiac department. I had this incredibly smart group of folks who could eat numbers and provide context,” she says now, passion evident in her voice. “It was an awesome job.”

When it came time for questions, one girl—the daughter of a man in Pelletier’s group—raised her hand. “If you weren’t doing this, what else would you do?” she asked. Without pausing to reflect on her response, Pelletier shot back, “I’d want to be CEO.” Standing in the spotlight before hundreds of colleagues in a packed auditorium, Pelletier explained why she thought leading companies was heroic and why she believed she was ready.

By that time she’d worked at Sprint for seventeen years, and Pelletier was the youngest person and first woman to report directly to the chairman and CEO, Bill Esrey. Esrey was one of Pelletier’s key mentors, iconic and intimidating and “a real statesman kind of guy,” and he’d led Pelletier on “an incredible rocket-ship ride” through the company. She’d worked in market and product development before being tapped as executive assistant to the president, Ron LeMay. In this 24-7 role with no set job description, Pelletier became one of six trouble-shooting mentees groomed to lead Sprint in the future.

After two years working nonstop for LeMay, Pelletier led strategy for Esrey, attending high-profile meetings and learning the art and science of mergers and acquisitions at a time when her industry was consolidating. “I popped into corporate center and the doors blew open. I got to look at the company through a portfolio lens,”

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Pelletier says. “I’d do deep dives in other divisions, come back up, put it all in context. I had to generate points of view about where the company should be looking, heading. I was in a candy store and all the shelves were available.”

But at the same time her career was thriving, Pelletier’s marriage was collapsing. “Relationships crumble in strange ways, and the office was my escape,” she says, remembering how Esrey supported her through a difficult divorce. “For months, Bill was the only one I told. He would come to the office early, as I did. I’d be at my desk working before anyone else showed up, and I’d break out crying because my life was shifting like this. He just had this uncanny sense. He’d pop his head in the room and we’d talk about the business or some big news story. He was such a big character in the company, but he was sensitive and gentle enough to be my backstop. He would say gently to me, ‘If you get to feeling this way in a meeting and need to step out, I’ll be your cover.’ He offered really practical ways to get through a rugged time.”

Sprint was a second home for Pelletier, so when both Esrey and LeMay were forced out in 2003 over a questionable tax shelter, she found herself adrift. “I looked left and right and saw a lot of men, a lot of competition. I had a staff role. I had done line work, and that’s how people prepare to be CEO. I could do it,” she says. “But when my two mentors left, I was saddened.”

So that spring, when she received a call from a headhunter at the global recruiting firm Spencer Stuart to gauge her interest in a CEO job, Pelletier got chills. And when the recruiter mentioned where—Anchorage—she shuddered again. Two summers before, Pelletier had traveled with her husband on a small cruise ship to Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, the largest national park in the United States and the most remote in Alaska. She remembered

sitting alone on the beach, staring at monolithic icebergs and wondering, *What can you do professionally in Alaska and still have this at your doorstep? This is the most beautiful place on earth, but how do people make a go of it here?*

“My words on the stage, the place I’d just visited, the stunning picture of that iceberg in my mind: It all came crashing down on me,” she remembers. “I had this epiphany. I was going.”

Alaska Communications Systems (ACS) had been formed four years earlier by “a classic 1950s manager” who had leveraged strong relationships to roll up local telephone properties across the state. But, Pelletier says, he was ill-equipped to steer the business through a competitive twenty-first century. “From a management standpoint he was invisible. He didn’t meet with customers and employees. There was no go-forward business strategy.”

The firm’s board members courted Pelletier intensely for six months, and from afar she researched the firm, investigating its history and rivals. She spoke with ACS directors every few days, but before agreeing to sign on, she wanted to understand what was really happening inside this operation. For that she had to consult the man she was being hired to replace, a man who had been told only late in the process that he was being ousted. “It wasn’t a warm or long conversation, and he didn’t think I had what it took to manage the company,” says Pelletier in her sweet, modulated voice. “All I need to hear is ‘You can’t do it.’ That’s what he told me, and I doubled down to prove otherwise.”

Pelletier—who has short dark hair, bright brown eyes, and a tendency to say “heck”—had finalized her divorce by then and had never had children, so in some ways it was a blessing that she didn’t have to convince anyone to join her. But it also meant she was heading to Alaska alone, in winter, not knowing a soul.

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In October 2003, she loaded two huge duffel bags, “the kind you can put bodies in,” with books and a lead crystal reading lamp, suits, and so many shoes. For the time being, she’d be living out of a hotel, and who knew when she’d have access to her storage space? Pelletier crammed it all in, everything she might need—including evening gowns, stilettos, and rhinestone sandals—and prepared to become a chief executive. She arrived in Anchorage on a rainy Friday night, and the head of human resources met her at the hangar and took her to a Residence Inn a block from the office. “There she was, helping me schlep all these shoes, many of which I never wore in Alaska,” Pelletier laughs. “But it was part of my security blanket.”

ACS would pack up her furniture and deliver it a month later, so there were only so many inaugural errands she could run, only so much provisioning she could do. On a previous visit, she’d driven past company headquarters, a municipally owned pile of gray cinderblocks she could describe simply as “gulag architecture,” but she’d never been inside. Pelletier decided to head into the office the next day to get her bearings. New key-card in hand, she took a deep breath and entered. The building’s nondescript, “hospital tan” walls and industrial carpet were a far cry from the rich woods and Oriental rugs she’d left behind at Sprint, and when Pelletier walked up four flights to her new office, she found it totally empty. There was nothing: no computer, no budget, no telephone list. Nothing, Pelletier recalls, save the scent of her predecessor’s cologne. “It just felt very cold, and I wondered, ‘Is this how people like things here?’ There was not a lot of love applied to that company.”

Pelletier then ventured to a car dealer to purchase the Land Rover a friend in Kansas City said would keep her safe on Alaska’s icy roads. But when she told a salesman what model she wanted, he

just smirked. He didn't have that brochure, much less the car. It was Alaska, lady, and the latest models didn't debut here. So much for "Altitude, Not Attitude," as the bumper stickers read.

Yet the day was bright and crisp and, if other attempts at nest building proved fruitless, at least Pelletier could buy herself a fur coat. She wasn't a fur lover, but Alaskans considered pelts a necessity to combat wicked winds. Alaskans wore their fur like armor, and with her new chocolate brown, ankle-length sheared beaver, Pelletier would be equipped to meet her troops the following night.

ACS's board of directors had asked its new CEO to come to the Marriott Hotel on Sunday evening to get acquainted with her management team, and Pelletier was hoping for a smooth transition. When she arrived at the designated conference room, French doors flung open and, like a new bride entering a banquet hall, Pelletier was announced with great flourish. It was only then—when the mingling stopped and everyone froze, and when her employees stared, stone-faced and dumbfounded—that Pelletier learned that no one had been told a new face would appear in the corner office Monday morning. Surprise!

"The person who planned it, it must have been the Marriott, had no clue about the backdrop," she says. "There was one long table and I sat in the middle and could speak to exactly three people. That didn't feel so good."

Though she commenced one-on-one meetings the next day, Pelletier says her employees remained complacent. She knew they felt challenged and abused, that no one had considered them, but in the end she couldn't summon their enthusiasm. "It was a very downbeat employee base. They hadn't felt a win in a long time. They weren't pulled together as a team," she sighs. "There was no fire in the belly, no interest to hit the restart button." A quick,

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steady turnover ensued until only one senior manager remained—the firm’s general counsel, “which is great because you always want someone who knows what’s in the closets.”

Pelletier relied on her stocked Rolodex of friends and former colleagues to recruit superstars who could convince their families to move to Alaska. “I had a 100-day plan,” she smiles, “and for the next 100 days, I planned the work and worked the plan.” In addition to hiring, Pelletier met with the ACS’s largest shareholders and customers, and with media, community groups, and the state regulatory commission. She tried to ingratiate herself with the Anchorage community, but this too proved difficult. “When Alaskans see newcomers arrive, they expect they’re carpetbaggers who will make money and leave,” she says. “My second week on the job, at an Anchorage Chamber of Commerce meeting, I mentioned I’d bought a house and I got a standing ovation. It was my first clue: To show Alaskans that you’re a good guy, you need to invest in Alaska.”

Pelletier needed to prove she was there to stay, but to call Alaska “the last frontier” was an understatement: She faced economic and cultural challenges she’d never anticipated. The state is more than twice the size of Texas with a population smaller than Austin’s, and its economy is markedly different from that of the rest of the country. Pelletier says Alaska’s \$38 billion Permanent Fund, which distributes dividends mainly from oil producers to every state resident, has a discouraging effect on the working populace. “If you’re a business-minded person like me, going to turn a company around, you’re operating in an entitlement culture with lots of libertarians. It’s off the grid and they like it that way, but at the same time they need all the developments happening in the lower forty-eight,” she says. “It’s a strange mix of ‘get-out-of-my-face, but still send the money.’”

Pelletier got used to people calling her a “cheechako,” or newbie, and she began to overhaul her new firm. She established a budget, which didn’t exist when she stepped into her role, and set out to build Alaska’s first statewide wireless network. During her tenure as CEO, Pelletier bought and built submarine cables to connect Alaska’s networks to the lower forty-eight states and repurposed ACS’s legacy residential telephone assets for business. And, from day one, she rehabilitated the company’s culture. “We made it more customer-centric. We care about and measure customers,” she says. “We break down our walls and think about end-to-end process. We cut across departments and ask questions, rather than reinforcing the silo mentality I walked into.”

In the course of this transformation, Pelletier also realized ACS needed a new board, as the firm’s fresh strategy required skills and experience its current directors lacked. Because many local corporations are run by Alaska Native women, Pelletier began to make cold calls, introducing herself to herald the changes she was making and to ask the women to recommend potential directors. By then, Pelletier had weathered enough long, dark winters to be deemed a “sourdough,” or survivor—which meant the ladies actually took her calls.

Anchorage is a small community, and the same people tend to sit on boards and attend black-tie dinners. By calling and showing up, Pelletier eventually met the influential women in town, and slowly she was accepted. Once she’d graduated from a cheechako to a sourdough, Pelletier discovered women there to help her succeed, and one defining day these ladies took seats around a very big table.

Pelletier and other women from Anchorage began convening to pursue their separate and common goals. Some were Alaska Natives, while others were transplants, but all were sourdoughs with a proven commitment to the state economy. Once a month, Betsy

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Lawer, the president of the First National Bank of Alaska, would open her boardroom and about a dozen community and business leaders—all female—would file in. Members included a lawyer in Senator Lisa Murkowski’s office; the chancellor of the University of Alaska Anchorage, who now chairs the U.S. Arctic Research Commission; the superintendent of the Anchorage School District; and senior executives at BP Alaska and Alaska Airlines.

For an hour and fifteen minutes, the women delivered updates on their diverse areas of expertise. “We went around the table. They’d say, ‘What’s up in the telecom space, Liane?’ and I’d give my description. Then Betsy would tell us what the housing market was doing,” Pelletier says. “I’ve been around men most of my life and they shoot the breeze, but we were so purposeful about picking each other’s brains. We’d just go at it and we were extremely efficient. It felt like we solved the world’s issues in an hour.”

The last few years have seen an explosion of women’s groups like The Vault and 4C2B. Formidable ladies across professions are convening at unprecedented rates, forming salons, dinner groups, and networking circles, and collaborating to achieve clout and success.

Job creation and the oil and gas industry were always central to the discussion, and the women would advocate together when the legislature met in Juneau. Quietly, they wielded their collective influence in the state. And while they weren’t there to socialize, sometimes they’d wink and whisper that old saw about men in town: *The odds are good, but the goods are odd.*

“We would decide ahead of time if it would be just us chickens, or if we would have a guest like the governor or the head of

ConocoPhillips, whom we would grill on issues,” says Pelletier. “Invited guests, mostly guys, would walk into the room and say, ‘Oh my God. I didn’t realize you all knew each other!’”

In e-mails, the ladies called themselves “4C2B”—“Force to Be,” as in “reckoned with.” 4C2B bounced around ideas, circulated job opportunities on a private distribution list, and helped each woman gain a competitive advantage in her field. Some of its participants were key clients of ACS, and Pelletier says 4C2B helped her establish relationships and develop insights into her customer base. “Through these relationships, I was able to show that the ACS they used to know, which was rigid and monopolistic, was now service-oriented,” she says. “I used that platform to educate them, and I know they helped spread the word. We all did that for each other.”

Ultimately, Pelletier spent seven and a half years at ACS, and she groomed her successor before moving to Seattle to become a professional corporate director. Now that she’s back in the lower forty-eight, Pelletier smiles when recalling that girl in the audience at Sprint who asked what she wanted to do next. When Pelletier decided to leave Sprint for ACS, the girl’s father came home and told his family over dinner. “That’s great!” the girl exclaimed. “Don’t you remember she wanted to be a CEO?”

“It wasn’t my employee, but his daughter who remembered,” Pelletier says. “He wrote an e-mail to tell me, and I printed and kept it. She’s now in college and from what I understand, she’s quite a rock star.”

Playing the Gender Card

It wasn’t that Pelletier had never experienced professional support from women. There was one other female in her “Leadership Challenge” class, as the Sprint bench of six were called, and the two

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made a pact to share promotion and compensation details, and to help each other script difficult conversations for as long as they worked as colleagues. But it was only when she left the comfort of Kansas that Pelletier found strength in numbers. 4C2B women were drawn from different arenas, and through the sheer breadth of their expertise and connections, they could affect large-scale change.

In the past, women like Pelletier had few outlets for their concerns as they rose in their careers. They relied on supportive male mentors like Esrey and LeMay and they sought other gals for friendship, but they didn't expect their girlfriends to further their careers. So, like Kim Moses, Pelletier never envisioned groups like hers springing up across the nation, and she'd certainly never heard about The Vault.

But the last few years have seen an explosion of women's groups like The Vault and 4C2B. Formidable ladies across professions are convening at unprecedented rates, forming salons, dinner groups, and networking circles, and collaborating to achieve clout and success. Their coteries often have tongue-in-cheek names—like SLUTS (Successful Ladies Under Tremendous Stress) in New York, or the VIEW (Very Important Executive Women) in Atlanta, or Brazen Hussies, which convenes women across regions—and their goals are the same: purposeful mingling among equals.

Suddenly, it seems, women who would never prioritize the sisterhood are finding themselves in a sea of doppelgangers. Women who wouldn't deign to “play the gender card,” much less use that dowdy, dated “f-word”—*feminism*—are discovering ways to connect and advance one another professionally. They are now doing deals not because of affirmative action or an altruistic intent to lift up the gender, but because it is smart business with people they know and trust. Their informal relationships are resulting in billions of dollars

of transactions, corporate board seats attained, promotions landed, and companies formed and funded. *For the first time in history, women are seeing a monetary return on time invested with girlfriends.*

The next decade will see an explosion of female wealth and power. But it's not about the money, women say. It's about the love. There's a massive money trail, but the relationships themselves are not transactional; they're true friendships based in loyalty, care, and respect. And in nearly every case, women trace triumphs to a simple query:

“How can I help?”