

Amanda Pampuro: Two years ago, Angelina Jolie wrote an email to her ex-husband, Brad Pitt. "I am putting this in writing so not to get emotional. I have reached a painful decision, with a heavy heart, that I want to share with you. You know how much I wanted to buy Miraval, as a family business, as a place for us to visit together, and as a place to hold diplomatic and humanitarian meetings. Above all, it is the place we brought the twins home to, where we were married over a plaque in my mother's memory. A place that held the promise of what could be and where I thought I would grow old. Even now, impossible to write this without crying, I will treasure my memories of what it was a decade ago. But it is also a place that marks the beginning of the end of our family."

Constance Grady: They were Brangelina, the portmanteau, which was worth so much more together than apart.

AP: That's Constance Grady, a culture writer for Vox.

CG: There's this tabloid video I'm kind of fascinated by, where it's just raw footage of like a tabloid reporters' feed of them on the red carpet together somewhere. And he's shooting Brad. And he's like "Brad, Brad, go to Angelina, go to Angelina," because the picture of the two of them together is so valuable. And he's like roving with disappointment as Brad sort of starts to turn away and walk separately because like a picture of just Brad Pitt that's like way, way less important.

AP: When Brangelina split up in 2016, no one saw it coming. What followed was one of the most bitterly contested celebrity divorces in recent history. But what came after was in some ways even uglier – a lawsuit over Miraval, an estate in the South France. It was this lawsuit that opened up a window into Pitt and Jolie's private lives and revealed the reason their marriage fell apart. This is Sidebar, a podcast from Courthouse News. I'm your host, Amanda Pampuro, and I'm joined today by our Los Angeles reporter, Hillel Aron. Hey Hillel.

Hillel Aron: Hey Amanda.

AP: So, where do we begin?

HA: Well, let's start with when they meet because it's a pretty good illustration of just how savvy these two people are at controlling their public image. It's 2003, they're both huge stars, but their personal lives couldn't have been more different. Jolie was 28, and she'd just gotten her second divorce, this time from actor Billy Bob Thornton. They famously wore vials of each other's blood around their necks. She also scandalized Hollywood when she kissed her brother on the lips at the Oscars. As for Brad Pitt, he was married to America's sweetheart, Jennifer Aniston, star of the hit TV show "Friends." Here's Constance from Vox again.

CG: There was a real possibility when Brad and Angelina first got together that it would kind of destroy both of their careers because they were screwing over Jennifer Aniston, who everyone liked so much, and that they could both come out of this painted as the villain and home wreckers. But instead, they handled that in very, very savvy ways. They sort of repositioned their images to be focused on their family and their philanthropy. So, they have a number of children together biologically, they also adopt a number of children, many of them from underdeveloped countries. They start traveling the world with this enormous brood of kids kind of surrounding them, to raise awareness for various charities. They sell the pictures of their first biological kin to People and then announce that they're donating all of the

money to charity. It's just this very enormous spectacle of look at us, we're good people, we are being good to our kids, we are being good for the world. Why would you ever hate us?

AP: I remember that. And how many kids do they have?

HA: In total, they end up with six kids. Jolie has two adopted kids from before. There's Maddox, who was from Cambodia, and Zahara, who's from Ethiopia. They have a biological daughter, Shiloh. And in 2007 they adopt 3-year-old Pax from an orphanage in Vietnam. And in 2008, Jolie gives birth to twins, Knox and Vivienne.

AP: Got it.

HA: They year before that, in 2007, the family goes on vacation in the South of France. And they love it so much, they decide that they should shop around for a house or an estate, maybe – for what Pitt would later describe as “a European base for our family ... where our kids could run free and not be subjected to the celebrity of Hollywood.”

AP: A “place to hold diplomatic and humanitarian meetings.”

HA: Right. That's what Jolie says in that email. So, they fly around in a helicopter, over Provence, and they are just kind of looking around at the squares on the ground, that's how they house hunt, and pretty soon they fall in love with this place called Château Miraval – French for “miracle.” It's a vast, 1,300-acre estate with olive trees, a lake, huge vineyards, stone buildings and a 35-room manor house. There's even a recording studio, converted from an old water tower. Pink Floyd recorded part of their album “The Wall” there. Pitt and Jolie purchased Château Miraval in 2008 for 37 and a half million dollars. At the time, Miraval has a small wine-making operation. And for a while, this is sort of an afterthought for Pitt and Jolie. But at a certain point, Pitt starts to take an interest in it. Now, I think it's worth getting into this wine business a little bit because it's going to become hugely successful and for a time it's really going to be a big part in Brad Pitt's life, maybe too big a part of his life and it plays a pretty pivotal role in how their marriage falls apart. So, Pitt gets this partner, this guy named Marc Perrin, and they decide they're going to make rosé, which in late 2012 is having a moment. I spoke on the phone to this wine writer based in England on the phone named Tamlyn Currin.

Tamlyn Currin: I think at first everybody thought that perhaps it was just another trend in wine, you know, a little fad that would die out but in fact has gained traction.

HA: Do you have a sense of why it's become popular?

TC: I think it's because our tastes are changing as consumers. We are eating fresher foods, we eating less meat, more vegetables, more fusion food. And there's you know, change from wanting very high alcohol wines and heavy big reds to fresher wines with less alcohol that are more thirst quenching. Rosé is increasingly becoming a very serious category of wine in its own right, no longer just the kind of drink that you have beside the swimming pool. You know, it's no longer just ... a girls drink. It's now becoming quite a foodie wine and rosé is being made more and more seriously, really with depth and breadth and complexity.

HA: So, at this point, Brad Pitt gets really, really into making wine. He gives an interview to Wine Spectator magazine where he says, “I'm a farmer now.”

AP: That reminds me of a Hallmark movie.

HA: Yeah, he says, "I love learning about the land and which field is most suitable for which grape, the drama of September and October: Are we picking today? Where are the sugar levels? How is the acidity? Is it going to rain?" And he says, "For better or worse, given my compulsive nature, if we are going to be in the wine business, let's make the best wine we can."

AP: Is the wine they make any good?

HA: By some accounts, yes. But not all accounts.

TC: Their rosés are pretty ordinary. There are far better producers of rosé. Their rosés are expensive but in terms of quality, very much ordinary tasting in my opinion and I taste a lot of rosé every year. It's all about the branding. It comes in a very heavy magnum, they only bottle as magnums, again part of the brand story. It's 280 pounds for a magnum, so probably one of the most expensive roses in the world and very much in my opinion not worth the money. I think it's very popular among the kind of influencer crowd, so serious wine lovers wouldn't touch it.

AP: I just called my local liquor store, and they have Miraval on sale. So, I'm imagining it's gotten pretty popular.

HA: Yeah, it's gotten very popular. Before Pitt and Jolie bought Miraval, the winery was producing about 150,000 bottles of wine a year, given mostly to fancy restaurants and that sort of thing. But this new partnership, eventually, would be putting out 10 million bottles a year. Revenues from the company grew from \$3 million in 2013 to more than \$50 million in 2021.

AP: Wow. So, when does it all start to fall apart?

HA: OK. So, in 2014, Pitt and Jolie finally get married in Miraval's ancient chapel. But just two years later, in September 2016, Angelina Jolie files for divorce.

AP: And is this totally out of nowhere?

HA: Pretty much. There had been no reports of friction or anything. I talked to a matrimonial attorney — that's what they call them now. Her name is Nancy Chemtob.

Nancy Chemtob: In 2016, it definitely was a surprise. They look, you know, they look fabulous. They still look fabulous. And, you know, it seems like they had it all. And they just, you know, not only were having children, they were adopting children, and they were doing good. Yet being in the business of family law, divorce law and matrimonial law, I see a lot of surprises.

HA: So, in the wake of this surprise announcement, there's a hint of what happened. An incident. It happens aboard a private jet, flying from Nice to Burbank. This is five days before Jolie files for divorce.

HA: Information about this flight comes out in drips and drabs. But we know that the FBI is "gathering information about an alleged incident involving Brad Pitt and his children aboard a private flight." And then TMZ reports that Pitt is under investigation for child abuse. But that's all we really get for like years.

Neither side publicly addresses it, except Pitt starts to say in interviews that he's quit drinking. Here's Constance Grady from Vox again.

CG: There's this sort of vague story that's out in the tabloids and the gossip press that Brad Pitt that the family had all been flying together on a private plane. And Brad Pitt was drunk, he gets into some kind of confrontation with Angelina and with their 15-year-old Maddox. Angelina Jolie says that this has gotten physical, Brad Pitt says it hasn't. The FBI investigates, there's no charges. This is all kind of vague and most people are like, I don't understand what's happening and I like both of these people so I'm just going to continue to like both of them.

HA: Meanwhile, the couple's divorce heads to court and it's very ugly. Here's the attorney again, Nancy Chentob.

NC: This litigation is really outrageous. It's a really, really long contentious case. It's one of the longest cases that I have, you know, watched pan out. I think one of the factors in a nasty, nasty divorce, which is this is when there is somebody who was wronged. And I feel like they both feel that they were wronged here.

HA: And it's kind of amazing if you think about it. Remember, Pitt and Jolie are geniuses, they are savants at carefully managing their public images. But this divorce shows that even the most strategically minded people can be overcome with emotions. Here's another divorce lawyer – sorry, matrimonial lawyer – Steve Mandel.

Steve Mandel: First of all, the fact that they didn't have a prenup I find extremely interesting, irresponsible, whatever. Some attorney should have said you guys have so much, we should figure out what we're going to do. This shouldn't be that complicated, except when emotions get involved, and this case, to a large extent, seems to be emotionally driven.

HA: The main battleground is, as is so often the case, the kids. Jolie wants sole custody, Pitt wants joint custody. In 2018, a judge rules that Pitt should get more time with the children, writing, "The children not having a relationship with their father is harmful to them." Then Jolie accuses Pitt of not paying "meaningful" child support. Then Pitt's lawyers file a motion to keep documents in the case under seal, suggesting that Jolie is leaking stuff about Pitt to the tabloids. And this is a pattern that starts emerging – Pitt wants things kept a secret. In 2019, the couple is declared legally single, but the legal battle is just getting started. The couple agree to a private trial.

AP: A what?

HA: Yeah, it's this is a weird thing that California has — it's a private trial overseen by a retired judge — the same retired judge who married them at Miraval. And this private trial lasts months, and features just an endless parade of therapists, witnesses and experts. And the judge rules that Pitt should have joint custody. But then Jolie files an appeal, and a three-judge panel disqualifies the private judge, finding that he didn't sufficiently disclose a business relationship he had with Pitt's attorneys. It is around this time that Angelina Jolie sends that email to Brad Pitt, that you read at the beginning of the show.

AP: "I have reached a painful decision..."

HA: Yeah, exactly. Why don't you read that next part.

AP: "In the last four years I have seen lots of inconsiderate behavior, money spent in ways that I would not have approved, and decisions made I was not consulted on ... I do not feel I can be involved, publicly or privately, in a business based on alcohol, when alcoholic behavior harmed our family so deeply."

HA: So, she's drawing a direct connection between this really successful wine business that Brad was obsessed with and his behavior, which she calls abusive and alcoholic.

AP: So, she wants to sell the company?

HA: Yeah, either the company, or her half of the company.

AP: They own it 50/50.

HA: Yeah, when they bought the estate, they did it through these separate holding companies. His holding company is called Mondo Bongo, a Joe Strummer song that appeared in Mr. and Mrs. Smith, which is the movie set they met on. Hers is called Nouvel, French for "New." He actually paid for 60% of Miraval, so initially, his company owned 60%. But a few months before their wedding, he gives her the 10 percent so they would be equal 50/50 partners in both the estate and the business.

AP: A wedding gift.

HA: Yeah, something like that. So, at first, Jolie was going to sell her half to Pitt, for \$54.5 million. And the deal was almost signed. But at the 11th hour, at least according to Jolie, Pitt demanded that she sign a "non-disparagement clause that would prohibit Jolie from discussing outside of court any of Pitt's personal conduct toward her or the family." That's according to a cross-complaint that Jolie would later file. This was a step that Jolie was not willing to take, so she walked away and sold her holding company, Nouvel, to the SPI Group for \$67 million.

AP: That's a lot more money.

HA: It is.

AP: And what is the SPI Group?

HA: A very large alcohol distributor, which also owns Stolichnoff Vodka. And it's controlled by a Russian billionaire named Yuri Shefler. After the deal is signed, SPI Group puts out a statement reading: "We are thrilled to have a position alongside Brad Pitt as curators of their extraordinary vintages."

AP: Let me guess: Brad Pitt was not so thrilled.

HA: He was not. And he files a lawsuit — against Jolie, the SPI Group, Yuri Shefler. Pitt says that he and Jolie had an oral agreement, that they had "agreed they would never sell their respective interests in Miraval without the other's consent." And now Shefler writes Pitt an email that I really like, in an attempt to kind of smooth things over. You want to read this one, since you read Jolie's?

AP: Sure. "Dear Brad. I am writing to you in these anxious and baffling times when the designs of a wicked, aggressive man dissolve the frame of civilized society and the atrocities of war destroys the countries." What is he talking about?

HA: OK, so first of all, Russia has just invaded Ukraine, so there's that. But also, Pitt in his lawsuit called Shefler a Russian oligarch.

AP: Oh...

HA: And he's telling him that actually, he doesn't like Putin and the FSB has tried to kill him a couple of times and he goes into a whole long spiel about it.

AP: Ah. And then he writes: "The reason to outline my life path over the last 20 years is very simple — I have been at war and I am fully aware of all the burdens and hardship of it. War in any shape is destructive. The last thing I want is to start a legal war, which will clearly be very costly, time and efforts consuming." And then they go and have a legal war.

HA: They go and have a legal war. Everyone sues everyone else. Jolie countersues Pitt saying there never was any oral agreement not to sell to other parties. Shefler also countersues Pitt. Pitt sues Jolie again in Luxembourg, saying the transfer of the 10% of Miraval from Mondo Bongo to Nouvel was invalid. It's all gotten very complicated and very acrimonious. Here's Steve Mandel, the lawyer.

SM: As an attorney, if I would be representing either one of them, I would say, "Guys, what are you doing, you have enough money, you have generational money at this point, you can either look forward and enjoy the good things in life, you could spend the rest of your life attacking you trying to tear the other one down. Now, if you want to do that, that's your prerogative. But you have six children together, and the fallout to these children, I hope you're setting up a trust fund to pay for their therapy bills, because for them to be put in the middle of this, and there's no, there's no financial reasons why this is necessary." These are just people being very now-minded, short-sighted, vindictive.

HA: It's in Jolie's cross-complaint that she finally addresses the elephant in the room: what happened aboard the private jet? What ended their marriage? She writes: "Over the years, Pitt developed an addiction to alcohol, which resulted in increasingly destructive behavior towards Jolie and the rest of their family." She describes how on the private jet, Pitt takes Jolie into the bathroom, grabs her head, shakes her, pushes her into the wall. He punches the ceiling and tells her, "You're fucking up this family." One of the children asks, "Are you OK, Mommy?" Pitt says "No, she's not OK. She's ruining this family. She's crazy." One of the children confronts Pitt, and he lunges at the child. So, this is why the FBI got involved, did their investigation. This FBI report comes out with more details thanks to a Freedom of Information Act request that was anonymously filed by Jolie. And it reveals that Pitts said this really nasty thing about one of their children, he said quote, "He looks like a fucking Columbine kid."

AP: Ah, that's terrible. Are there two sides to the story?

HA: Yeah, Jolie's side is that she needed to sell Miraval, that a substantial amount of her quote "personal wealth and liquidity was tied up" in it and that she was happy to sell to her ex-husband, but that she didn't want to be forced into a legally binding deal barring her from speaking about this abusive incident. And she never wanted to tell anyone about the jet ride. In her cross-complaint, she writes: "She has gone to great lengths to try to shield their children from reliving the pain Pitt inflicted on the family that

day. But when Pitt filed this lawsuit seeking to reassert control over Jolie's financial life and compel her to rejoin her ex-husband as a frozen-out business partner, Pitt forced Jolie to publicly defend herself on these issues for the first time."

AP: And Pitt?

HA: Brad has denied being abusive. He says that he poured everything he had into the wine business, including quite a lot of money — more money than Jolie ever did. And that he just doesn't want this business partner foisted upon him. Here's the attorney again, Nancy Chemtob.

NC: I see it from both of their sides. I think that Brad Pitt really did try to clear his name, and everything really does circle back to this 2016 incident. Her perspective is that she's the mom and she wants to protect the children and her husband has a bad temper. And she witnessed it and she wants to make sure her kids are safe. I always say you never know what's going on behind closed doors, and I get to hear and see it all. I don't get to see it, thankfully, but I get to hear it.

AP: So where do things stand now?

HA: The legal dispute, at this point, is mostly between Pitt and Jolie's old holding company, Nouvel — which he says should still legally be owned by Jolie, but which Nouvel says is owned by Shefler's company, SPI Group. Jolie is really more of a side character at this point. SPI Group says Pitt has been stripping Miraval of its assets and spending its money on vanity projects, like a new swimming pool. Again, you get a sense here this is not really about strategy and that emotions have taken over. Litigation like this has a way of perpetuating itself and multiplying and it's not like any of these people will run out of money soon, so this case could very easily go on for years.

AP: In our celebrity-obsessed society, I feel like we are always hungry for moments when movie stars reveal themselves as being just as flawed as moviegoers. Brad and Angelina bought Miraval in hopes of creating a haven away from Hollywood, but the vineyard dispute ultimately revealed how their rosé relationship soured in to vinegar. The denouement will be anything but neat as the court parses out who owns what. In a way, that's fitting, since there are rarely any miracles or perfect endings outside of Tinseltown. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to Sidebar by Courthouse News and leave us a review. Join us next time as reporters Kirk McDaniel and Kelsey Reichmann preview the U.S. Supreme Court's upcoming term. These are the cases that will ultimately shape who can access America, whether that means ending a pregnancy, getting a gun or booking a hotel.