

Meet the Characters of *Family Friends*

At twenty-one, Jenna McAlister has already learned how to survive on her own.

She has a four-year-old daughter, a job she's good at, a dream she's worked years to afford, and a firm belief that the safest person to depend on is herself.

Then she moves into a new apartment building.

Suddenly there are neighbours offering help, old friends appearing at the door, dogs wandering into her apartment, and one quirky guy across the hall who seems determined to make doing everything alone considerably more difficult.

Jenna and Matt

Jenna McAlister

Twenty-one | Single mom, dog groomer, aspiring business owner

Jenna is a planner.

She makes lists. She saves every spare dollar. She works long hours. And when life knocks her down—which it has done more than once—she gets up and keeps going.

At seventeen, Jenna became a mother to Abby. Four years later, the two of them are a tiny family of their own, and Jenna is determined to give her daughter the security she never had.

Her big dream is a mobile dog-grooming business. After years of walking dogs on top of her regular grooming job, she has finally saved enough money to get started.

Unfortunately, life has a habit of interfering with Jenna's plans.

Beneath all that determination is a much softer woman than she lets most people see. Jenna loves animals, misses figure skating, secretly writes poetry, and longs for the kind of friendship and family she has convinced herself she doesn't need.

A few Jenna facts:

- Started figure skating when she was four.
- Competed seriously as a teenager and twice won bronze.
- Once dreamed of becoming a veterinarian.
- Works as a professional dog groomer.

- Writes poetry in a private journal.
- Thinks of rhyming words when she's stressed.
- Dyes the ends of her blond hair blue.
- Calls her daughter "Abs."
- Is very good at giving help and spectacularly bad at accepting it.
- Has spent years saving for a mobile dog-grooming business.
- Believes almost every problem can be solved with more work, a better plan, or another checklist.

Matt

Twenty-five | Graduate student, computer guy, neighbour across the hall

Matt makes a memorable first impression.

Mostly because his couch gets stuck in the stairwell.

With perpetually tousled brown hair, glasses, an apartment full of computers, and a tendency to work through the night when absorbed in a project, Matt readily admits that he's a computer geek and a bit of a loner.

He's also kind, funny, observant, surprisingly muscular, and refreshingly comfortable admitting that he has quirks.

Matt doesn't mind silence. He doesn't mind being alone. And he doesn't particularly care what other people think of him.

All of which fascinates Jenna.

Even more confusing is his willingness to help without making her feel incapable. Whether he's offering a ride, looking at used RVs, sharing a computer, or simply carrying groceries upstairs, Matt treats helping someone as an ordinary part of friendship.

Jenna isn't accustomed to ordinary friendship.

She might have even less experience with what comes next.

A few Matt facts:

- Is twenty-five.
- Studies software engineering.
- Owns an impressive number of computers and monitors.
- Frequently loses track of time while working.
- Sometimes stays awake all night and sleeps during the day.

- Wears glasses but occasionally switches to contacts.
- Runs his fingers through his hair, usually making it worse.
- Is perfectly happy with comfortable silence.
- Has a subtle, self-deprecating sense of humour.
- Says what he's thinking more often than Jenna considers advisable.
- Needs time alone to recharge.
- Has a weight set in the lower level of his apartment, which he calls “the dungeon.”
- Is devoted to his little dog, Poppet.
- Believes Jenna could stand to get a little more practice accepting help.

Friends, Family & Four-Legged Companions

Abby

Jenna’s four-and-a-half-year-old daughter is energetic, affectionate, curious, and generally very sure of what she wants. She loves animals, pink, skating, and joining her mother at the grooming salon. Abby also has asthma and some very strong feelings about getting her clothes dirty. For Jenna, she is both the centre of the universe and the reason nearly every plan begins with the question, *What’s best for Abby?*

Poppet

Matt’s little Shih Tzu may technically live across the hall, but Poppet has very little interest in respecting apartment boundaries. Friendly, affectionate, and surprisingly skilled at escaping, she quickly develops a particular fondness for Abby. Poppet once had difficulty trusting people, but by the time Jenna meets her, she’s more welcoming committee than watchdog.

Josh

Wavy blond hair, pale blue eyes, and one very complicated connection to Jenna’s teenage years. Josh and Jenna met at summer camp when they were sixteen, then went their separate ways under painful circumstances. Years later, an unexpected glimpse of Jenna on television brings their paths together again—and introduces Jenna to a part of her past she has worked very hard not to revisit.

Sylvanna

Josh’s girlfriend enters Jenna’s life carrying several shopping bags, a great deal of anxiety, and absolutely no idea what she's supposed to say. Dark-haired and soft-hearted, Sylvanna is facing a situation she never anticipated. Her willingness to show up anyway tells Jenna quite a bit about the kind of person she is.

Vicki

Warm, artistic, endlessly helpful Vicki lives downstairs with Gunner and seems to know exactly when someone needs a hand—even when that person insists she doesn't. She helps Jenna find her new apartment and gradually becomes something Jenna hasn't had in years: a real friend. Jenna eventually concludes that Stephanie's description of Vicki as a “magical do-good unicorn” is surprisingly accurate.

Stephanie

Readers of *Rules of Disengagement* will already know Stephanie, although Jenna meets her simply as Vicki's impossibly glamorous friend. Stylish, outspoken, and considerably more compassionate than Jenna first assumes, Stephanie is equally capable of offering support and telling Jenna when she's being ridiculous. She's still teaching guitar, still with Jake, and still not much of a cook.

Gunner

Vicki's rescue dog remains an enthusiastic member of the neighbourhood welcoming committee. Whether he's wearing winter booties, accepting belly rubs from Abby, or keeping Vicki company, Gunner has a talent for making himself part of whatever group happens to be nearby.

Darcy

The red-haired manager of the local animal shelter knows Jenna as both a volunteer and a talented dog groomer. Kind, practical, and fiercely devoted to the animals in her care, Darcy is one of Jenna's strongest early supporters. She's also instrumental in getting Jenna and her freshly groomed shelter dogs onto a local television segment called **Adoption Wednesday**.

François

François works with Darcy at the shelter and has the unenviable job of occasionally convincing reluctant dogs that grooming is a good idea. Big enough that he should have an advantage over most of them, he somehow still finds himself outmatched by a stubborn forty-pound husky. He and Darcy share an easy, affectionate relationship that doesn't go unnoticed by Jenna.

Jake

Stephanie's boyfriend brings food, trucks, painting expertise, and general competence into the expanding group of friends surrounding Jenna. He also has enough experience with Stephanie to know that teasing her carries certain risks. Readers of *Rules of Disengagement* will recognize him immediately.

Emily McAlister

Emily is Jenna's younger sister and one of the people Jenna misses most from the family she left behind. Nearly eighteen by the time of the story, Emily remains mostly outside Jenna's life—but the possibility that the sisters might someday find their way back to each other is never completely gone.

Jenna's Parents

Mr. and Mrs. McAlister are successful lawyers and demanding parents who expected excellence from their daughters. Growing up, Jenna learned that an A could always have been an A-plus and third place was still not first. Their expectations helped create Jenna's extraordinary determination—but also the voice in her head that insists every mistake means she hasn't worked hard enough.

And We Can't Forget Harvey

Harvey

The RV

Old. Off-white. Decorated with gloriously dated orange and brown stripes.

And absolutely perfect.

Harvey spent years carrying one family on vacations before appearing for sale at a Christmas-tree farm. Jenna sees something else entirely: sinks, grooming tables, storage, a dog-washing station, and the beginning of the future she has spent years imagining.

The previous owners named him Harvey.

The name sticks.

Because every found family deserves an elderly RV.