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Dilloway, Margaret. The Care and Handling of Roses with Thorns

Galilee Garner?Gal for short?is a prickly person at best, and something of a loner. A biology teacher at a private high school, she is known to students and faculty alike as a hard taskmaster, but one who prides herself on turning out more AP exam high-scorers than anyone else. She lives alone, with only one close friend?her polar opposite, the school?s sensitive and outgoing art teacher. She?s also in the end stages of kidney failure and must keep to a strict dialysis schedule to survive. Her one main ambition in life is to breed the next unique, stand-out breed of rose in the greenhouse out back. Gal?s carefully structured existence is thrown into disarray when her unreliable sister?s teenage daughter Riley arrives unannounced on Gal?s front stoop. At first resistant, Gal begins to soften to her niece and the two?one damaged by years of chronic illness, the other by years of neglect and sporadic affection dished out by a drug-addicted mother?form a tentative bond. Riley begins to find herself among her fellow students and Gal finds herself reaching out and making new friends herself, something she never expected.

While the rose-related metaphor is the tiniest bit heavy-handed, the story is a touching one as an at first thoroughly unlikeable character begins to develop into a better version of herself and a dysfunctional family comes together with a new understanding of each other?s struggles.

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