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Romania-1884; PESSA (mid-teen) is the headstrong and spunky daughter of the village rabbi. When an arranged marriage to an upper class scholar, AVRUM (early 20's), is proposed, Pessa is forced to put aside her 'boyish' ways and begin her journey towards womanhood.

By 1899, Pessa is blissfully in love with Avrum and mother to their seven daughters. Pessa loves her family, however, running a home is difficult for her and she feels constant guilt that she must rely on her eldest daughters to do most of the work.

When her beloved Avrum is attacked by a couple of Russian Cossack thugs, he suffers a heart attack that abruptly ends his life. Pessa is utterly devastated and must now face the reality that she will take his place as head of the house and lead her large family – alone.

The future prospects for Pessa and her daughters are that of household servants and she is resolved to not accept this fate. Forced to leave her youngest daughter with Avrum's parents, Pessa chances immigration to America for a new start.

At Ellis Island, a foolish woman advises Pessa to hide her money in the hems of her clothing and not declare it at customs lest it be stolen. Pessa naively listens to her and the customs officer swiftly deports them back to France on the grounds that without a sponsor and money, she cannot support her family.

Two years later, Pessa has become headstrong and determined and she decides to try for America again. Pessa's young nephew agrees to sponsor the family in San Francisco if her eldest daughter, his childhood sweetheart, will marry him. Pessa heartily agrees and they depart.

Once Pessa has established a home in San Francisco, married off her eldest daughter and put two of her younger daughters in boarding school she finds life with three able bodied children who can clean and sew more manageable.

She finds love again and remarries much to the chagrin of two of her daughters, who leave her and move in with their eldest sister. Ridden with the guilt of her failed maternal abilities, Pessa realizes that it may be too late to reunite her family.

When the Great San Francisco Fire/Earthquake hits in 1906, Pessa gains a new perspective on life and new appreciation for her children. She reunites her daughters, welcomes a son and makes another new start...this time in New York.