

# Regressive Tendencies: The Beginning

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By LilJennie

## Chapter 1: The Fall in the Spring in the Summer

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Kammy finally accepted that she was lost in this rainy, sticky, sweaty, miserable jungle. She dropped the armload of firewood she'd gathered – Leander didn't really want it anyway, she was certain, because the expedition had propane stoves and kerosene lanterns. No, he'd sent her on an errand to get her out from underfoot, and Kammy knew it. This wasn't looking good. She was getting thirsty, and she had no idea which way the camp was now. She brushed a sweat-drenched lock of red hair out of her eyes for the  $(n+1)^{\text{th}}$  time and took stock. What did she have, and what could she do?

One canteen, now empty. That was the biggest issue. Siberian huskies really weren't built for the Amazon jungles, even though she'd gotten her coat trimmed for this trip. If she didn't find water soon she might be in real trouble. She was starting to worry. But there had to be a stream or creek or even a spring around here somewhere. There were natives who survived in these jungles, like that horse boy who kept hanging around the camp, and therefore there must be water somewhere. She just had to find it.

One cell phone, now useless. She didn't even know why she'd brought it, really; she knew she'd be going far from any cell towers. But it was important to her; Aunt Nadeen had given it to her on her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, and ever since then it had been her constant companion, a symbol of her growing independence. She texted her friends constantly, especially Penelope and Margaret. She'd actually been excited to tell them about this internship, which sounded like some kind of adventure movie. Sure, she was going along as a statistical analyst, which made sense given how good she'd always been with math, but the point was that *she was going on an expedition to the Amazon rainforest*. "AWSUM OR WUT?!" Yeah, awesome indeed, Kammy thought, looking at her phone with its dead battery.

One set of car keys, also useless. The car was thousands of miles away. She'd just gotten a car, an actual car of her own, on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, less than a month ago. Aunt Nadeen was paying for half, and that was amazing considering what had happened to her parents. Kammy was to pay for the other half, with this internship for starters, and would be continuing to pay half afterward by working at whatever jobs she could find. However ... yes, she had a car, she was independent, sure. But it didn't help her much right now. She could be going shopping, going to movies, even going on dates, but no, she was *lost in the freakin' jungle*.

Trail rations, survival blanket, camping knife, water purification tablets – now if only she had some water to use them on, oh the irony – and the map and a compass. She looked at these. She'd never been a Scout, but she knew geometry. The camp's position was marked on the map. If she could find a landmark, and take a compass reading, she'd know exactly how to get from there to camp. But how to find a landmark?

She was now aware of just how far she was from everything she'd ever known. So much for independence! She had nobody to depend on but herself now, and frankly she wasn't winning any awards. Not that she'd admit that to anybody else, but as she trudged downhill, getting thirstier and thirstier, she thought about ways she could have avoided this situation. Maybe if she'd been nicer to Leander – but no, they both just rubbed each other the wrong way. Simon Leander, bloodhound

and ex-military survival expert for this expedition, had been against her coming along from day one. “The wilderness is no place for a little girl!” – that’s what she’d overheard him saying before she’d entered the conference room. “She’s going to get herself hurt or worse, and then it’ll be our fault!”

“Then you’ll just have to protect her.” That’s what Dr. Catrileo had said to him – she’d always been on Kammy’s side. “How is she supposed to learn to survive if she never gets a chance to learn?”

“She can learn in school,” Leander had begun – but that had been when Kammy entered the room, ending that little conversation. Ever since then, Leander had avoided Kammy, while Dr. Catrileo had extended friendship to her, trying to take her under her wing, so to speak, although capybaras had no wings, of course.

Kammy chuckled at her little joke, then realized that the heat and her thirst must be getting to her, if she’d thought that was funny. That was scary, almost as scary as the way her tongue was sticking dryly to the inside of her mouth. She’d decided to go in a downhill direction, because that would almost certainly lead her to a stream or pond, perhaps one that might be on the map, but more importantly, it would be water.

That Leander! When she made it back to camp he’d probably yell at her for not bringing back any firewood. If she made it back to camp, that is .... She distracted herself from that thought by thinking about that morning.

She’d emerged from her tent already dressed in what they all wore, which was day-glow orange shirts and olive-drab cargo pants, the expedition’s uniform. The shirts were breathable and cool, and the bright color helped them see each other through the jungle. The pants weren’t as breathable or visible, but considering the number of biting snakes and bugs, you didn’t want to be wearing something near the ground that anything could easily bite you through. The chunky all-terrain boots were also necessary; they kept you from slipping and protected your feet when branches and rocks fell on them. Everything was practical, ugly, and thoroughly uncomfortable – and probably Leander’s idea.

Dr. Catrileo had been the first one to see her as she looked for breakfast. “Oh, good morning, Kammy,” the botanist had said in her usual placid tone of voice, holding up a pink flower. “Look at this – there’s a large population of the *albigensis* species northwest of camp. I wonder how large its range is?”

“Um, sounds like something to investigate, all right,” Kammy had said, hoping she wouldn’t be the one sent to investigate it. She was supposed to stay at camp and crunch the numbers, right?

“And investigate it I shall,” Dr. Catrileo had continued, “right after breakfast. I’ll get you some density numbers to work with.” They sat down at a table – basically a glorified picnic bench – with bowls of flavorless instant oatmeal and cups of coffee that tasted like it had been filtered through Leander’s sweatsocks. But Dr. Catrileo went right on. “You know, Kammy, this flower’s pollen has over 30 times the concentration of a promising alkaloid than the *anatensis* species, which is the best one that grows back in the States.” They had walked to the dining tent as she spoke. “If we can find a way to cultivate it, this flower could make a helpful drug.”

“That’s ... great,” Kammy had said, though the lack of enthusiasm in her tone could easily have been due to the coffee, at which she was currently making a face.

“Of course it’s great,” Leander had said, coming up from behind them. “Someday you might have a disease that drug cures. You’ll be loving it then. There are probably people with that disease now. Dr. Catrileo is saving their lives. What are *you* doing?”

“Look, I’m doing whatever anybody wants me to do,” Kammy said. “That’s mostly data entry and statistical analysis.”

“Oh, Simon, please,” said Dr. Catrileo. “She’s a valuable member of our team, aren’t you, Kammy?”

What Kammy *was*, was looking for an exit from the conversation. “Well, I’m done with breakfast, so I’ll just go ask Dr. da Silva if he needs me to do anything …” she had begun.

“He’s not out of his tent yet,” Leander had said. “I know what you could do. We’ve got no firewood. You could go gather some. But don’t go too far from camp. And look out for that native horse kid who keeps hanging around, babbling about springs and wells in broken Spanish. He’s probably harmless, but keep your distance.”

“OK, OK, fine,” Kammy had said. “Anything to get outta here,” she had added once out of earshot.

And man, had she gotten out of there. Way, way out of there. And now, if she didn’t find some water soon, she’d start going out of her mind too. There was some dense foliage blocking what seemed to be the most direct downward path, so she pushed it aside, and suddenly she was through.

She found herself in a glade, a small natural clearing, but the first thing she noticed was the pool of bright, sparkling water in the middle. The water was trickling down the side of a large rock formation, and the bottom of the pool looked rocky too. It was as if a big chunk of geology had decided to intrude into the surrounding biology here. There weren’t any plants growing on the rocks where the water flowed, and the pool looked empty of plant and animal life from where Kammy stood. She saw what looked like it had once been a wooden sign by the pool, but there wasn’t much left of it, so it was difficult to read. “ADVERT ... BEBER EL AGUA,” it said. It looked like it *might* be Spanish, but it was so old and damaged that Kammy doubted that she’d have been able to read it even if she knew Spanish, which she didn’t. But there was water. She’d found water. She wasn’t going to die.

She got out her canteen and dipped it into the pool, filling it. The water felt wonderfully cool and even somewhat tingly where she touched it – maybe it had some natural carbonation. She saw that the pond wasn’t totally devoid of life, so the water wasn’t poisonous – there were some tadpoles swimming vigorously around the edges. What was good enough for baby frogs was good enough for her. Raising the full canteen – did it seem smaller? – no, probably just hallucinations – Kammy began to drink.

It was probably because she was so thirsty, but this was the sweetest, most refreshing water Kammy had ever tasted. There must be a natural spring up on top of that rock formation, she thought, and it just trickles down the rock. While she was drinking, she noticed that the stone was rough and jagged, full of striations, as if seismic forces had just broken it away from some other rock formation minutes ago, which was obviously not the case. Odd; shouldn’t it be worn smooth by now, if the water had been running down its surface night and day for, what, centuries? But then a moment of light-headedness distracted her from that thought. Oh great, probably heatstroke. Why had she signed up for this again? She dipped her canteen into the water again to fill it back up.

What? The canteen seemed smaller, and made of plastic, almost like a toy canteen. More hallucinations. She must have been thirstier than she thought. She finished filling it and drank it dry a second time, then dipped it a third time to fill it again, so she’d have water for the journey back to camp.

But when she took it from the water, it looked completely different. It was a ... well, sort of like a water bottle, with a kind of nozzle on its lid, like a spill-proof travel cup, or one of those sippy cups that little kids drink from. In fact, it was brightly colored, white with a bright blue and orange lid – it was difficult to mistake it for something for adults. What was going on? She'd heard that heat and dehydration could cause brain damage ... but she hoped that wasn't the case here. Then again, if she was worrying about it, that probably meant she was all right ... right?

Right?

That was when her pants fell down around her ankles. She quickly grabbed for them, and her backpack fell off, her shoulders slipping right out of the straps, which hooked on her elbows behind her back until she straightened her arms to free them. Looking down she realized that her shirt had grown to knee-length and was hanging loose on her ... or was she shrinking? That was ridiculous – but if that wasn't it, then what was happening? Her underwear felt like it was still on, though it felt somehow thicker than normal.

Then her shirt fell down to her elbows, its neck opening now wider than her shoulders. She reached down to pull it back up and noticed her flat chest – what? Over the past few years she'd been watching, pleased, as her body's adult curves had gradually developed, but now it looked as if that had never happened. What was more, she heard a plastic-like crinkling sound as she moved. She dropped her shirt, which easily fell to her ankles on top of her pants, and looked at her underwear. It felt even thicker and looked like ... a diaper? A disposable baby diaper, with little colorful pictures of toys printed on it, fastened on with little tapes. What in the ...?

This made no sense! She burst into tears, because she was so afraid that she was losing her mind. Normally, when Kammy felt like crying, that urge was more than balanced by the fear that somebody would hear her, but there was obviously nobody around for miles, or she'd have been rescued by now. So she wailed like a child, and because she was so upset Kammy didn't notice or care that her voice sounded exactly like a child's.

And then, suddenly, Kammy forgot why she had been crying. The cute little toddler husky puppy was wearing nothing but a diaper and carrying nothing but a baby bottle full of water. She raised the bottle and sucked on it happily for a moment. Then she saw the huge pool in front of her, squealed with glee, wriggled free of the pile of clothes around her feet, and waddled into the spring, falling into the water, giggling and splashing.