

Title: Learning The Ropes

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Summary: Two weeks after he hired Kozik as a mechanic at Teller-Morrow, Clay sends Tig on a repo run and orders him to take the "new guy" along to show him the ropes. Only problem is, the job's in Oakland and Tig isn't sure taking Kozik back to his old stomping grounds so soon is such a good idea.

LEARNING THE ROPES

By Scribblesinink

"Tig." Clay came strolling into the work bay, where Kozik and Tig were buried waist-deep in a car's innards. Damned engine kept stalling; for the life of him, Kozik couldn't figure out why, so he'd asked Tig to take a look.

"Yeah?" Tig pulled up out of the car. Glancing sideways, Kozik saw he was wiping his hands on a greasy cloth as he turned toward their boss.

"Got a repo job," Clay went on. "Claremont."

"Oaktown?" Tig tossed the cloth onto the workbench. "They don't got their own repo service anymore?"

Kozik kept his hands busy checking wires and connections while the conversation went on beside him. He didn't want to look like he was eavesdropping.

"Dealer's from Charming." Paper rustled as Clay flicked through a sheaf of pages before pulling out a single sheet. "Says the buyer moved a month or so back. Doesn't trust anyone but us to handle it."

Tig snorted. "More like he doesn't wanna pay the big city boys their big city fees."

"Probably." Clay chuckled. "Either way, job's yours. Oh, and take the new guy with you."

"What new—wait, you mean Kozik?"

At the mention of his name, Kozik's fingers stilled on the wires.

"We got any other new guys?" Clay's tone was caustic.

Kozik straightened up, no longer bothering to pretend to not be listening. Knowing how Tig had stuck his neck out to get him the job, he'd made sure to keep his head down and his mouth shut, and worked hard to prove himself. But though he had been at T-M for more than two weeks, Clay hadn't openly acknowledged Kozik as one of the mechanics. Until now.

"Lemme get this straight." Tig scrubbed his hands through his hair. "You want me to take the tow truck all the way to Oakland for a fuckin' repo, and take Kozik along?"

Clay furrowed his brows, clearly irritated by Tig's tone. "You got a problem with that? Thought you two were kinda joined at the hip."

"Yeah, I got a problem with that." Tig ignored Clay's jibe. "Seein' too much of the dude already, between here and the house. C'mon boss, have Dog and Clayton take the job. Or at least lemme take Mouse instead."

Kozik added his frown to Clay's. Why the sudden hostility? If Tig no longer wanted Kozik to stay at his place, he could kick his ass out any time he liked. Unless—. Kozik's breath caught.

Unless this was about something else entirely. Something Tig didn't want Clay to know about. That he still didn't trust Kozik to be around his old stomping grounds.

"Uh," Kozik cleared his throat. He probably should be grateful Tig wasn't sharing his thoughts with Clay, but the distrust still stung. "I should finish—." The rest of the words stuck in his throat at the glare Clay shot his way.

With Kozik's protest silenced, Clay turned back to Tig. "You asked me to give the guy a job." He folded the page he'd pulled from the stack of forms and thrust it into the breast pocket of Tig's workshirt, patting his palm against Tig's chest. "Now you get to show him the ropes." With that, Clay strode off, cutting off any further objections Tig might have.

"Crap." Tig's muttered curse wasn't meant for Kozik's ears. Fishing the crumpled paper from his pocket, he squinted at it before jerking his head in the direction of the tow truck. "Let's go. We'll deal with this piece-of-shit car later."

Snatching up the kerchief Tig had left on the workbench to wipe his own hands, Kozik caught up with Tig as he headed for the truck. Tig had plucked his sunglasses from the top of his head and slipped them on, so Kozik couldn't read

his eyes, but he didn't need to: Tig's angry stride betrayed his mood well enough for Kozik to decide he'd better hold his peace until they were safely out of sight of T-M. If he was right about the bug currently up Tig's ass, he'd rather deal with it in private, away from Gemma's eyes prying from behind the office blinds or the curious ears of their workmates.

Once they'd passed the *You Visited Charming* sign, Kozik no longer could hold his tongue. "I know why you don't want me to come with."

Tig sniffed. "Oh really, huh?"

"You don't trust me." Kozik refused to let Tig's sarcasm put him on the defensive. "You're thinking, once I get to Oakland, I'm gonna want to score again." To his relief, he managed to keep his voice steady.

"Didn't say that." Tig's fingers drummed a rhythm on the steering wheel.

Kozik let out a humorless laugh. "Don't need to."

"Christ." Tig yanked the wheel over to change lanes so they could pass a slow-moving sedan. "You're worse than Colleen. She was always puttin' words in my mouth." He peered in the mirror to check it was safe to pull back in. "And she was my fuckin' old lady. What's your excuse?"

Kozik bit his tongue not to rise to the barb. Instead he said, "I'm not gonna. I'm not that stupid."

Tig sighed. "I know." He added in a softer tone, "Brother, it's only been a few weeks. Can't be easy."

Kozik tugged at the sleeves of his shirt. "I can handle it."

Tig made another wry noise in the back of his throat. "Better be true," he muttered, almost to himself. "Cause I sure as shit ain't doing *that* again."

Kozik looked out the side window, not responding. He wished Tig would take him at his word that he'd keep his nose clean. But with his history, he could understand why it'd take more than that.

oOo

A warren of narrow lanes crisscrossed the hills of East Oakland. Dead ends, tight curves and no signs made finding the address scribbled on the repo form mission impossible. Goddammit, Tig swore to himself. He was the club's SAA, for Chrissakes. Couldn't Clay have foisted this fuckin' job onto someone else?

"You sure you know where you're going?" It was the third time Kozik had questioned Tig's navigational skills out loud.

"Course I do, asshole." Tig was getting sick of the backseat driving. Especially since Kozik was right: thirty minutes of cruising the hills, and they still hadn't located the house or the car, and he was no nearer to finding the address.

He squinted through the front window in both directions of the T-section they were at, trying to decide which way to go. Maybe—. Randomly, he hit the blinker and turned. Place had to be around here somewhere.

Kozik uttered a noise that made it clear he didn't quite believe Tig and, leaning back in his seat, put his elbow on the window ledge and looked out at the trees whisking by. He didn't say anything, but his opinion was visible in every line of his body.

Jesus Christ. Tig again cursed silently. He was beginning to feel like a damned fool. What former Marine would get his damned ass lost in the California hills?

"Should be a road atlas in the dash," he muttered after another half mile, all but admitting defeat. Kozik didn't say a thing but Tig could sense his attention on him. He didn't return the look. Best he keep his eyes on the road ahead, because if Kozik so much as cracked a smile, Tig would bash his face in. His hands tightened on the wheel.

Some of what Tig was thinking must've gotten across: Kozik wisely kept his trap shut as he leaned forward to rummage in the dashboard compartment. After a minute or two, and a grumbled complaint about the number of empty candy wrappers clogging the space, he pulled out a dog-eared Rand McNally. "Gimme that form, bro."

Tig pulled the creased sheet from his breast pocket and slapped it into Kozik's palm. Kozik flipped to the Oakland section of the atlas and squinted at the map. "Ha!" He jammed a finger on the page. "There."

Tig cast a quick glance over at where Kozik's fingertip rested. "So, genius, how do we get to there from here?"

Kozik hunched further over the map. "What the fuck road are we on?"

It was Tig's turn to hold back his grin and swallow down a sarcastic comment. Instead, he pulled over at the next intersection, leaving the engine running, and angled his body toward Kozik to take a look at the map for himself. Kozik pulled the atlas out of his reach.

"You drive, I navigate." Under his breath, Kozik added, "Unless you don't trust

me with that, neither."

Tig winced. He held back the sharp come-back that had sprung to his tongue—the words hadn't been for his ears—and, letting out the clutch, got them moving again.

His gut instincts were right; it was too early for Kozik to be trusted anywhere near this city. Happy had warned him more than once: Kozik getting rid of the monkey he was carrying wasn't gonna be as easy as a mere cold-turkey detox. Yet, Tig admitted to himself, he could've been less caustic about it. Kozik was trying, and he should at least give the man credit for that.

"Listen, about earlier...." Tig hadn't been aware he was gonna say anything until the words left his mouth. He risked a glance at Kozik, who was carefully keeping his eyes on the map.

"Don't matter." Kozik shrugged. He pointed ahead. "Take a right at the next turn-off. And then a left. Should put us on the right road."

They drove in silence for another minute, Tig steering the tow truck along the narrow roads in accordance with Kozik's instructions. It was a tight enough fit he had to slow to a crawl and put a wheel over on the shoulder whenever they met someone coming in the other direction.

Kozik cleared his throat. "You ain't wrong, you know." His voice was low. "I still... want it. And at the same time, I don't. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Tig muttered. "Just hang in there, brother."

They reached the crossroads where Kozik had said Tig should take a left. Tig narrowed his eyes at the small street sign nailed high on a post across from him. He thumped Kozik lightly on the shoulder with his right fist. "Good job."

Kozik grumbled something and rubbed his shoulder, but his mouth twitched in pleasure.

Turning into the street, Tig hunched forward to glower through the windshield. So, where the fuck was the damned house? At last, he spotted a mail box next to a graveled driveway displaying the right house number. He released a breath. "A'right, here we are."

He pulled the tow truck up just past the drive and backed in. The car they'd come for—a metallic blue Ford Probe—was parked next to the house. That was the first break they'd had in the whole stinking job. Thank Christ the idiot owner wasn't out with it or hadn't tried to hide it by putting it in the garage.

"A'right, dude, let's hook that car up and get the hell outta here," Tig said as he backed in further. Hopefully without anyone the wiser until they were well gone. Repo jobs could get... interesting, but Tig wasn't in the mood for anyone giving him any more crap on this one.

Luck wasn't on his side. Before he'd even brought the tow truck to a stop a couple of feet from the front of the Ford, the house door flew open and a woman came scurrying out, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

"Hey. What are you—?" She broke off as she took in their work shirts and the garage's name on the side of the tow truck. "Oh no." Her eyes widened in understanding. "No, no, no, you're not taking my car." She puffed up her chest and folded her arms.

Tig tossed her a look. "Yes, lady, we are. Watch us." Tugging on his heavy work gloves, he walked around to the back of the truck to release the dolly. "Koz, give her the paperwork."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but—."

The woman ignored Kozik's attempt at an apology, leaving him standing with his hand out, the form clasped between his fingers, like the goddamn fool he was, and stepped up beside Tig. "Come on, Mister," she pleaded, her fingers plucking at his rolled-up sleeve. "Don't go taking my car right before the holidays. How'm I gonna get my shopping done?"

"Ain't my problem." Shaking her off, Tig slapped his gloved hands together and reached for the dolly.

It had been the wrong thing to say. "You leave my car alone!" the woman shrieked, giving Tig a hard shove. Focused as he'd been on the dolly, he hadn't seen it coming, and only a quick stumbling step kept him from faceplanting in the grass. He was still cursing and getting his feet back under him as she added, "Tell that jerk we'll pay him next month, okay?"

Straightening, Tig glared back at the her. "I'm not your fuckin' errand boy. Tell him goddamn yourself." He released the straps. "On the phone."

A part of him—a very small part—did feel a little sorry for her. After spending an hour in these godforsaken hills trying to find the place, he knew this wasn't a good neighborhood to be living without a car. But she should've thought of that before she defaulted on her payments. Besides, Clay'd have *his* ass if he returned to Charming empty-handed.

She bit back a snuffle. "I'll do that, you SOB." She whirled on her heel and stomped back into the house. The door slammed behind her. Yeah, she was

pissed alright.

Putting her from his mind, Tig turned back to locking the car to the tow truck. Wasn't like he'd been called worse names.

"What do I do with this?" Kozik waved the form he was still holding, eyebrows raised.

"Date it, and leave her the carbon." Bitch could work shit out with the dealer on her own time.

Kozik ducked back into the tow truck's cab, presumably looking for a pen. Tig bent to check he'd attached the dolly properly. Wouldn't do to have the car come loose while they were towing it. He was tightening the straps when—.

"Whoa...!"

Tig swung around, but the woman was on him before the echo of Kozik's warning shout had faded. She was brandishing something— kitchen knife? Tig instinctively flung up an arm as she threw herself at him and caught the blade on the fleshy part of his right forearm.

"Ow! Fuckin' hell!" The knife had sliced through his skin and warm blood was welling out and running down his arm. Tig stumbled back. "You fuckin' cunt!"

Kozik yanked the woman away from Tig, his arms wrapped around her, while Tig clamped his good hand over the wound. It hurt like a mother, but he didn't think she'd cut an artery or anything. He sucked in a breath and looked back up.

The woman, still with Kozik's arm around her, was staring at Tig. With his free hand, Kozik wrenched the knife from her grip and flung it away, out of reach. She didn't fight him; she didn't even seem to notice. Her eyes were as big as saucers, and the blood had drained from her face. "I didn't—," she puffed. Then she slumped back against Kozik in a dead faint.

"Holy crap." Kozik carefully lowered her limp body to the grass and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "You guys get a lot of this?"

In spite of the throbbing pain in his arm, Tig snorted a harsh laugh. With his bloodied hand, he patted his pockets, searching for a clean kerchief. "No. Not like this."

oOo

The reek of antiseptic clogged Tig's nose, leaving a bad taste in his mouth and making his stomach churn. Goddamn it, he hated hospitals. The letters over the

double doors Kozik had dragged him through might have said *Urgent Care Center*, not hospital, but the place stank just the same: of injury and death.

"Are we done?" he snarled at the doctor tying of the last of the six stitches she'd decided he needed. It seemed like he'd been waiting an eternity since the triaging nurse had locked him into this tiny cubicle with the assurance that "someone will see to you shortly." Shortly, his ass.

The doctor snapped off her gloves. "Yes, Mr Trager, we are done." She offered him a sling to put his arm into. He grudgingly accepted it. "Sign out at the front desk, and you may leave." It was obvious that, though she'd treated him professionally enough while dealing with his wound, she didn't want to put up with his foul mood any longer than she had to. As soon as she'd finished adjusting the sling, she scurried from the cubicle.

Well, that suited him just fine. He hadn't wanted to come here in the first place, anyways.

The dumb knife-wielding housewife-from-hell had still been out cold when, as Kozik tied a bandana he'd dug up from a jeans pocket around Tig's arm to stem the blood, Tig had grunted, "We're done here. Let's get the hell outta the place."

"What about her?" Kozik jerked his head toward the woman. She was just beginning to gradually stir back to consciousness.

"Leave her." Tig tested the tightness of the handkerchief. Blood was still seeping through it, but it had stopped the worst.

"Don't do that." Kozik slapped Tig's hand away. "Shouldn't we call the cops or something?"

"Hell no! You out of your fuckin' mind?" Tig gave Kozik an incredulous look. "Doubt *she* wants the cops to know about this, and I sure as shit don't need that kind of attention." Cops sniffing around the club house was the last thing he wanted to have on his conscience.

"But—."

Tig held up his good hand. "No buts. We go. Now." He stomped toward the tow truck. As he reached for the door, a fresh jolt of pain shot through his arm. Crap. No way was he gonna work a stick shift with this arm, let alone steer the truck—along with the Ford Probe it would be towing—through these hills. "You drive," he grunted in Kozik's direction, walking around to the passenger side. "Keys are in the truck."

"And the tow?" Kozik aimed a thumb at the car hooked up to the dolly. "You

finished with that?"

"Yeah." He'd just been done checking it when that nutter had come at him with her knife. "It's secured."

A minute later, they were pulling out of the driveway. In the side mirror, Tig watched as the crazy bitch sat up, looking around in dazed confusion. The repo paperwork Kozik had left next to her fluttered in the grass.

Stupid bitch. And goddamn Clay with his goddamn repo job. If this arm was as fucked up as it felt like, it'd be days before he could ride again.

Twenty minutes later, they'd left the hills behind and Kozik had turned right onto the main road.

"Where you going?" Tig sat up straighter. "Charming's thatta way." He nodded his head in the other direction.

"Takin' you to get patched up first. There's a place I know nearby—."

"Fuck, I'm not going to some damned hospital," Tig growled. "Turn the truck around."

"Ain't a hospital." Kozik shifted gears and the truck picked up speed. "Urgent care center."

"I don't give a shit what it's called." Tig reached for the wheel with his good hand. "I'd told ya: turn around."

"Jesus Christ." Kozik dragged Tig's hand away from the wheel before he could get a good grip. "Dude, you're bleedin' all over the seat. I'm not taking you back like this." He huffed a laugh. "Clay'd fire my sorry ass on the spot."

Tig had grumbled another objection, but his arm had been throbbing like a bitch, the blood slowly soaking through the bandana, and Kozik's argument had taken the wind out of his sails. "Fine." He'd collapsed back against the seat and jammed a boot against the dash. "We get me stitched up, and then we're outta there."

Now, as he checked his watch, he discovered nearly two hours had passed since Kozik had pulled up under the portico of the two-story building and told him to go find himself a doc while he parked the truck. It had felt like much longer. But if he'd known beforehand he'd have to cool his heels for this length of time before the damned doc showed up, he'd never have agreed. He'd have been just as okay with waiting until they reached Charming and Chibs could patch him up. And now, with the day mostly done, they still had to drive back to

Charming, deliver the repo'd Ford, tell Clay about the bitch with the knife, and explain to Gemma why the scheduled repairs weren't done yet.

He rolled down his sleeve and tweaked the sling into place, before flexing his fingers experimentally. The movement tugged a little at the new stitches, but the doctor had given him the good shit against the pain, so it didn't hurt too much. Snatching up the bloodied bandana, he stuffed it into his pocket and he strode from the cubicle. Time to get as far away from this place, with its pastel walls and its stink of disinfectant, as he could.

When he reached the small reception area, he found himself faced with a half dozen empty plastic chairs and no sign of Kozik. He sucked in an unhappy breath. Where the fuck had the fool gone? Had he'd taken off while Tig was busy waiting?

Shit. Had this been Kozik's plan all along? Dump Tig at the clinic, and sneak off to score?

With a disgusted grunt at himself, Tig shook his head. Nah, even he wasn't as paranoid as to believe all that. Kozik had brought him here because he'd been bleeding like a stuck pig. Dude had promised to keep his nose clean, hadn't he? Tig should at least give him the benefit of the doubt.

He stalked toward the double doors, intent on finding out where Kozik had gone. The chick at the front desk called him back. "Mr Trager?"

Her smile was pretty enough that he only scowled at her a little as he quickly filled out the paperwork she pushed toward him. Handing her back the pen, he jerked his head toward the chairs. "Dude brought me here. Where'd he go?"

She pulled her eyebrows together, considering his question. "Blond, blue eyes, quite buff?" Tig rolled his eyes but nodded. "He was lighting up. I told him to take it outside." She waved a hand toward a no-smoking sign fixed to the wall.

Tig puffed out his cheeks, more relieved than he was willing to admit. "We done here?" He gestured at the papers she was flipping through.

She offered him another bright smile. "Sure thing, Mr Trager. Have a nice day, and take care now."

Tig shrugged his good shoulder. "Yeah, whatever."

He found Kozik lounging outside, one booted foot braced against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his fingers as he stared off into space. He dropped the cigarette butt and ground it out as soon as he saw Tig. "You all done?"

"Yeah."

"What took you so long?"

Tig snorted. "Wasn't my idea to come here." He narrowed his eyes at Kozik, giving him a good once-over. "You been here all that time?"

Kozik blinked. "Where would I—?" His expression turned to hurt, and damned if that didn't make Tig feel like the biggest asshole. "Yeah, man. Gave you my word, didn't I?"

"That you did." Tig lowered his gaze, acknowledging Kozik had a right to be upset. "Let's just get the fuck home."

They didn't speak another word during the drive to Charming. Gemma was waiting for them in the lot as the tow pulled in, hands on hips. "Where the hell have you—?" She broke off at the sight of Tig clambering from the passenger seat with his arm in a sling. "Jesus, Tigger." Her entire demeanor did a one-eighty from pissed to concerned and she touched his arm lightly.

"I'm fine, mama," Tig assured her. "Just a little misunderstanding. Nothing we couldn't handle." He met Kozik's eyes across the truck's hood and gave him a nod. Kozik's mouth twitched into a pleased smile, understanding and accepting the nod for the apology it was. Yeah, from now on, Tig could trust him to handle his shit alright.

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