The first miles were calm. Sunlight flashed through the trees, and the road curved gently between fields. Mara kept a generous following distance, giving herself room to brake smoothly. When she came upon a patch of fallen leaves, she eased off the throttle and kept the motorcycle upright, avoiding any sudden turns or braking. Wet leaves could be as slippery as ice, and there was no prize for rushing through them.

At a crossroads, a pickup rolled toward the stop sign. Mara made sure the driver had seen her before continuing. She stayed out of blind spots and rode as if other motorists might not notice her—a habit that had saved her from trouble more than once.

Farther up the hill, the air grew colder. In the shade, the pavement looked dark and slick. Mara slowed before the bend and watched for damp leaves, gravel, and frost. She avoided abrupt movements, letting the motorcycle follow a smooth, steady line. Around the next curve, a deer stood at the roadside. Mara eased off the throttle and covered the brakes, prepared to stop without swerving wildly.

At the overlook, she pulled into a safe turnout and shut off the engine. The valley below was scattered with red and yellow trees, and the late-afternoon sun made the whole landscape glow. She took a drink of water, checked the clouds gathering to the west, and decided it was time to head home before dusk.

The ride back was quieter. Mara switched on her lights, reduced her speed as visibility faded, and watched carefully for animals near the road. When she reached her driveway, she felt the pleasant tiredness of a day well spent—and the satisfaction of having made every mile count.