

420 Moments — Toni (by D. Barnes)

By the time Toni's tire blew, the day had already been asking too much of her.

It happened just after five-thirty, the sky still bright enough to feel insulting. She'd barely made it out of the office parking lot before the steering wheel started tugging left, the car thumping like it had a pulse of its own. She eased to the shoulder, hazards blinking, forehead resting against the wheel for just a second longer than necessary.

Meetings that went nowhere. A client who talked over her. An email marked *urgent* that could have waited until tomorrow—or never. She stared at the shredded rubber and laughed once, sharp and humorless.

Of course.

The spare got her moving again, but the knot in her shoulders stayed tight. Home was close—too close to feel safe from interruption. Three blocks later, at a four-way stop she'd driven through a thousand times, a sedan rolled forward when it shouldn't have. A crunch of metal. A jolt. Silence.

Not her fault. The other driver said it twice before she even opened her mouth.

Still, it took everything out of her.

By the time the police report was done and insurance information exchanged, the sun had dipped lower, the air cooling just enough to raise goosebumps on her arms. She drove the rest of the way home carefully, every sound in the car suddenly too loud, too present.

Inside her apartment, she kicked off her shoes and dropped her bag by the door. No lights. No phone. She filled the bathtub until steam fogged the mirror and slipped in, letting the heat loosen what the day had twisted tight.

Later—quiet now—she stepped onto the balcony wrapped in a towel, hair still damp. She took out the joint she'd rolled the night before, perfect and patient, waiting. She smiled at it like an old friend.

"This one's been calling my name all day," she said softly.

The first inhale was slow. Intentional. The exhale drifted into the evening air, carrying the day with it—emails, sirens, crunching metal, all dissolving into smoke.

Her shoulders dropped. Her breath deepened.

For the first time since morning, Toni felt like she had arrived somewhere safe.

Just for this moment.