

The Start-Up's Last Chance

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Northbeam Labs, a small software company in Austin, Texas, was close to collapse. The team had spent eighteen months building their budgeting app, Finch, but the launch, which was planned for the following Monday, was in trouble. During final testing, the app had crashed every time a user tried to add a photo of a receipt. The deadline could not be moved, because the marketing campaign had already been paid for.

On Monday morning, one week before the launch, the founder, Maya Ortiz, called an emergency meeting. She asked Daniel, the lead engineer, what had caused the crash, and whether the problem could be solved by Friday. Daniel admitted that nobody knew the answer yet. Maya asked him to stay late to ensure it was fixed, and she told the team that fixing the crash was the only priority.

The situation was made worse by a phone call from the company's main investor. He told Maya to fix the problem quietly, and asked her how the bug had been missed. Maya answered honestly, although the truth was uncomfortable: testing had been rushed to save money. She became increasingly anxious, but she promised that a full assessment would be completed within two days. If only they had hired a second tester last year.

Daniel wished the team had more time, and he wished he had rejected the early deadline. If the payment system had been tested properly in June, the bug would have been found and fixed weeks ago. Consequently, three engineers had to do the work of ten, and they had been working around the clock since Monday. Despite the pressure, nobody complained: everyone understood what was at stake.

The team debated the two possible approaches at length. Daniel argued that the launch should be delayed, whereas Priya, the marketing manager, insisted that the date had to be kept. In spite of their disagreement, both accepted that the current version could not be released. Eventually, Maya made the risky decision: a simpler, more stable version would be launched on time, and the photo feature would follow later.

The next five days were the most challenging the team had ever known. The servers were upgraded, and Maya had the landing page redesigned so the missing feature was never mentioned. Priya got the advertisements rewritten in a single night. Three major bugs were fixed, and by Saturday evening the new version had been approved by every tester. Daniel had barely slept, but on Saturday night he was smiling.

The launch itself was not spectacular, but it was solid. In the first week, the app was downloaded

twelve thousand times, and the reviews were kind. The modest success boosted morale, and users praised how simple and reliable the app was. The impact was significant: in six days, they had achieved something remarkable. Their commitment had been noticed, and the investor agreed the company had demonstrated it could adapt under pressure.

Later, Maya told a friend she had learned an essential lesson about deadlines. A perfect product that arrives late is worthless, whereas an adequate one can always be improved. If she had been offered the same choice, she said, she would have done the same thing. "We have been given a second chance," she said. "Currently we are rebuilding that feature, and this time it is being tested properly. Mistakes are forgiven, but broken promises are not." Then she laughed and added that she never wanted to hear the word launch again.