

THE INFLUENCER

SPEED MUST HAVE A LIMIT

(SAMPLE CHAPTERS)

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First published by Abhaidev 2021

First Edition: June, 2021

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To this existence; as always.

Acknowledgement

I am thankful to my family and my well-wishers, for without them this work of art wouldn't have been possible. Their constant support and motivation kept me going.

I am also grateful to all those who made this book better with their inputs, comments, and constant feedback.

I also want to thank the Universe for gifting me with the ability to conceive plots and weave stories, good or bad. What are writers and artists, after all, if not radio sets tuned to a particular frequency of the universal thought cloud?

The unintended shortcomings of this book (if you find any) are all mine. And I own them as all grown-ups should do.

Chapter 1

What could it be? Shreya asked herself as she stared fixedly at a folder on her husband's laptop.

The folder was password protected and bore the name "13579". She glanced nervously at the bed. Aditya was still asleep with his face turned away from her.

Could it be that Aditya has been watching porn in my absence? Shreya thought. Some weird twisted type of X-rated videos? No! Perhaps this folder contains official documents. Some confidential files owing to the nature of his work?

Shreya thought of moving upwards in the folder's hierarchy, but somehow, she couldn't. The password-protected folder caught her attention again. It had files and information, something that her husband didn't want her to know.

The mouse pointer hovered over it, and Shreya looked at her husband again. He was still fast asleep. The urge to see the contents of folder "13579" grew stronger with each passing moment. Humans are incredibly curious creatures, after all. The more you deny a man a thing, the more he wants it.

Finally, she clicked on the folder, and it asked for a password.

After thinking for a couple of seconds, she typed something and pressed enter. Incorrect, a pop-up window said. Try again.

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She dismissed the pop-up and thought again. She nervously rubbed her lower lip with her finger, frowning. She tried another possible password and pressed enter. Voila! The folder opened.

Our net-banking password! she thought. I knew it. How many passwords can a person afford to remember, after all?

Videos. A lot of them. Shreya couldn't decide which to play first, so she sorted the folder with the oldest first.

The oldest video was named "Who we are". She put her headphones on and opened it. It was Aditya, saying something she couldn't make out. She increased the volume and played the video from the start again.



Hi. If you are my child and watching this, I want you to know that I made this video for you and you alone. It also means that I am dead now. What I am about to tell you will sound unbelievable at first, but it is true. All of it.

This video is meant for you once you turn 18. If, however, you are somehow watching this earlier, please turn it off immediately. I know I don't have any control over you. I can't stop you from watching this video further. I can only request you to stop.

Well, now that you have watched this video till this point, I want to tell you what this is all about. You see, I am not a normal man. I am different. I have a gift which very few people on this earth have.

I am an Influencer. Yeah, you heard it right. That's what people like me are called. Now you would be thinking—what's the big deal? There are influencers all around us. The ones who are social media celebrities. Those who have lots of followers

and start a trend if you pay them. Right? That's not who we are. We are not these social media icons or the ones who are blessed with fame. We are Influencers, and I mean that literally. Our only job is to influence people and make them servile. We compel people to yield and submit. Not by force or through blackmail, but by our minds alone.

Ever wondered why some people are assertive while others are not? Why some people inherently have the quality of leadership, while the rest struggle? Have you ever thought why some people are immensely popular, with people eagerly listening to them even when they don't have anything great to say? Why some guys are so successful with women? 'Don Juans' as the world calls them?

It is because they all have the ability to make people submit to their will. Many of these people don't know that they have this unique ability. They simply ascribe their success to confidence, assertiveness and their charming personality. What they don't know, however, is that they are Influencers too, although weak. Yes, believe me. Whatever I am saying is true. We Influencers exist.

Believe me, Influencers exist. But nobody knows how our ability works. What we do know is that we have to be in close proximity to our subjects and focus on making their will weaker. The more powerful an Influencer, the more he can weaken his subjects at a wider range. I am considered to be amongst the stronger ones, for I can influence a person from fifty meters away.

I know it may all sound rubbish to you. But you feel it too, don't you? How easily people accede to your demands. How easy it is for you to get what you want. Right? It runs in our genes. The progeny of Influencers are Influencers as well.

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Sometimes weak, sometimes strong. It is a genetic improvement—the result of the gradual, yet effective process of evolution. Experts say that people like us evolved because we increasingly became more and more social. With time, a few of us developed this trait so that we could dominate our social circles. Survival of the fittest, as they say. No one knows for sure though.

You must be wondering why I am telling you all of this, that too at this point in time. Well, I know you must be an Influencer as well. How strong you are, I don't know. But what I don't want is for you to remain in the dark and struggle—the way I had to.

My father left when I was three years old. There was no one to guide me. I don't want you to have the same fate. I don't want you to have to start from scratch the way I did. And I certainly don't want you to cope with everything alone. That is why I am recording this video even though you are yet to be born. For I don't know for sure how long I am going to survive.

I will tell you everything you should know. But remember, whatever be the case, you can't tell anyone this secret. Whatever be the situation, you can't disclose even an iota of what you will learn about yourself and me to anyone. Pause this video right now and make a promise. Promise that you'll protect this secret no matter what.

There is a secret society of which I am part of. It is called 'WIS'. They sought me out. And these are the very same people who will be seeking people like you in the future. They are the custodians; they are the guardians of the secret of the Influencers.

Most high-ranking government officials know about people like us. But they prefer to stay silent. We Influencers work with

police forces, government spy agencies, intelligence, leaders of the states, and businesses. On paper, we are sometimes appointed as secretaries and officers; sometimes we are just ordinary employees. But our real job is to get the better end of the deal for our employers. For example, I am currently working with the prime minister, officially as his secretary. But my job as an Influencer is to influence people to do his bidding, and that's what I have done throughout my career.

Have you ever wondered why at times leaders who are adamant, radical in their speeches, and not ready to yield at all, end up signing agreements or treaties which seem totally against their cause? Have you ever wondered why people say that we won all wars but lost them at the negotiation table? Well, it was people like me, Influencers, who were behind all of this. The more affluent the country, the more its leaders can spend on people like us.

Have you seen great world leaders? How they are surrounded by so many officials? Well, some of these officials who accompany these representatives of the states are none other but Influencers like me. Not all of us work for political leaders, though. Where an Influencer would be employed depends on how strong he or she is. The weaker ones work with the police force, the stronger with spy and intelligence agencies, and the strongest with representatives of the state. There are a few freelancers as well, but their influence is negligible.

All the successful leaders in this world tend to be Influencers themselves, which is why they are successful leaders in the first place. So when they deal with other leaders who are also Influencers, it is like a duel. That is the reason why the strongest of us work with heads of the states—to help our leaders win over their rivals.

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This ability of ours does not remain the same throughout our lives. With time and with practice, an Influencer can become more and more powerful until he reaches a peak. After that, the strength of his power declines steadily. This peak performance, the apogee of one's power, arrives at a different age for different people. But it usually happens when an Influencer is in his or her late forties and early fifties.

You would be surprised to know that of all the people we are the most sought after. We are paid in the likes of CEOs of big multi-national companies. In fact, there is a huge market for people who need our services. Based on our strength and our past successes, we are auctioned off, just like football players, to the highest bidder. We may remain in the dark, but we are the most important people on this planet. Well, there are others with different abilities as well. 'Erasers' come a close second, for they can erase the most recent memories of their subjects. But they are extremely few and rare, and their abilities have limited use.

What I want you to know is that the stronger the Influencer is, the safer the job. That's why I want you to listen carefully. It is necessary for you to be strong. Strong enough that you don't have to work for any intelligence or spy agency. Accompanying the prime minister is safer than being a spy, isn't it?

You must be thinking, why can't an Influencer choose the career he likes? Why does he or she have to work for the rich and powerful? The answer is that once WIS figures out you are an Influencer, there is no turning back. Once you become a professional, the only path is forward. WIS won't let you resign.

I forgot; I haven't yet told you anything about WIS. Well, the World Influencers Society is the organization that first identified my ability. They trained me, helped me find a job for subsistence. And they are the ones who won't let me leave this dangerous

path. WIS is, therefore, a sentimental father who would not even flinch about killing his daughter for honour.

There were a few who decided not to do this dirty work anymore and rebelled. WIS set their assassins on them. All those who refused to return to their old life of manipulating people were murdered. So, yeah, I am part of this dirty organization. There is no way out. My advice? One must always read the terms and conditions before checking that box and clicking next.

The most powerful Influencers in the world head and manage the activities of WIS through a fifteen-member board. I have not seen the faces of any of the board members. Only the high-ranking members of WIS know who they are. What I have heard is that every five years, there is a duel of minds between the senior members. Those who win become members of the board.

As I told earlier, leaving WIS is not easy. You have to stay until you die or retire. The only other way of escaping this secret society while you are still not old is when the majority of the board members agree to release you. There has been only one case in the history of WIS when a young person was relieved of his or her duty. All information about this person has been destroyed, so I don't know much. All I know is that it happened a month before I joined WIS. It was, perhaps, the only exception in WIS' history.

Most people leave when they reach their sixties, when they are no longer useful enough. But do not think that this means freedom. The families of Influencers are constantly monitored; for the descendants of these veterans are likely to have this strange power as well. It never ends. Once you become a part of WIS, they stick to you like your shadow.

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I know this is too much for you to handle. But believe me, it's all true. If you haven't been contacted by WIS yet, then it means either you have not used your abilities much till now, or you are too weak to be considered an Influencer. Despite this, I still want you to know the secret, for I am your father. There should be no secrets between us.

As of now, your mother knows nothing about this. Yes, I have kept her in the dark, as this is what WIS expects from me. But I feel chained and burdened. I have to tell your mother one day. How will I broach this subject to her, I don't know! But one day I will, despite having been warned by WIS against it.

I don't like my job anymore. This manipulation of people. It is immoral to make people subservient to get your way. I have often thought of leaving WIS, of escaping this life altogether. But then I think about my family. About your mother. What would happen to her if I am the next target to be eliminated by WIS?

Well, forget about all of my current troubles, my child. I will find a way through this conundrum. We don't know what's in store for us in the future. We all hope that tomorrow would be better than today. That's what keeps us going, isn't it?

I think this is enough for a day. I will be shooting more videos. And I will tell you everything about my life. Everything that you should know. Just remember, never reveal this secret to anyone who is not a member of WIS.

I know you must have many questions. But be patient, as all your questions will be answered one by one. Remember, I am your same loving dad and my actual profession has nothing to do with who I am as a person. Goodbye.



Shreya sat in front of the screen, her mouth agape with incredulity. She felt cheated, angry, and at the same time, utterly shocked.

Is this all a joke? she asked herself. *No! Had it been a jest, Aditya wouldn't have kept these files locked away like a secret. Oh my God! I know nothing about my husband. I know nothing about what he does. Everything he has told me is a lie.*

Her chain of thought broke when she saw Aditya moving.

“Hey, dear, what are you doing so early in the morning?” he asked in a sleepy, husky voice.

Somehow Shreya summoned all the courage she could and said flatly, “Nothing. Woke up early.” She wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “Thought of listening to some music this beautiful morning,” she added, faking a smile.

“You look tired and pale,” he said, carelessly rubbing his eyes.

“Oh. Do I?” She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “I guess I haven’t slept well.” She once again manufactured a smile. “With all the noise the loudspeakers had been making throughout the night.” She scoffed. “You know, I am too sensitive to noise. God, I hate it when religious activities involve loudspeakers. Can’t people pray in silence? Can’t people keep their faith to themselves?”

“Yeah. Your ears are far too sensitive. Come to think of it; every woman in this world has sensitive ears.” Aditya crowed with laughter, looking at her with playful eyes. “Am I not right?”

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Shreya responded by laughing too. She couldn't afford to let her husband know that she had been watching his secret videos.

"Hey, I was wondering about something," she said after a while. "What is the source of our thoughts?"

She succeeded in piquing her husband's interest.

Aditya raised his brow. "What do you mean by—"

"I mean, how do we think?"

"With our brains?"

"Yeah, but what is it that is doing the thinking? That ugly, wrinkled blob of meat inside our heads? I can't believe that. Never!"

"I am listening!" Aditya threw an inquisitive smile. "Please go on!"

"Okay!" Shreya took as deep a breath as she could. "Are we just radio sets? Tuned to a particular frequency? Are our brains simply tapping their potential from an invisible but universal thought cloud?" There was a thoughtful silence. "Seriously, what is the source of our thoughts? How do artists create art? How do writers write? What is it that is doing the creating?" She paused again. "Libet's EEG experiments suggest that we might not have free will. If the results of the experiment are to be believed, then what is the point? What is the fun if everything is determined? Wouldn't Almighty get bored with us? We are more than our thoughts. And we are certainly way more than our actions. But how and why?"

"Remember what we have discussed from time to time?"

“What?”

“Too much thinking is an ailment,” the Influencer said. “One must live in the moment.”

“Yeah,” Shreya said, producing a chuckle. “You are right. But we don’t have control over our thoughts, do we?”

“Yeah, but we can certainly train our minds to be more resilient,” he assured her.

“You are right! I need to learn the tricks of focusing my mind, my thoughts. And who would be a better teacher than you? Right?”

“Yeah, I am always right.” The Influencer giggled. “I am always right!” he repeated in a low but playful voice. “And I wouldn’t let my student down. No. Never!”

Silence enveloped them.

“Want some coffee?” Shreya asked at last, a thin smile on her face.

“Yes.” Aditya nodded. “That would be great.”

“Just a minute,” she said, feigning indifference. “I must clear this playlist of songs.”

“No hurry,” he replied, shifting on his bed. “Take your time.”

While Aditya was yawning and stretching, she exited the folder “13579”. She then cleared the video player’s history. Putting aside the headphones and closing the laptop, she stood up and locked eyes with her husband. Unaware of her predicament and her state of mind, Aditya smiled at her. She faked a smile once

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more, disengaged from his gaze, and trudged towards the kitchen to make coffee.

Once in the kitchen, she let out a big sigh. She felt that she could hear her heartbeats. As if that blood-pumping organ of hers had come to her mouth. She felt a prickly lump in her throat too. She rubbed it with her hand, but it didn't help. Even after swallowing, her throat hurt. She knew that the pain would remain. After what she had seen, her life was no longer the same. In just a matter of minutes, her whole world had turned upside down. And there was little that she could do.

Chapter 2

“Bye, Shreya.” Aditya waved. “I am off to the PMO,” he announced cheerfully.

Shreya smiled and waved back. This was the moment she had been waiting for. She was finally alone, and her husband’s laptop was at her disposal. But she didn’t rush towards it. She wanted to make sure that he was gone. She watched from the balcony as he waited for a cab. Finally, after three minutes, he got into one. Relieved that Aditya was finally gone, Shreya returned to where the laptop was. She opened the secret folder once again. The next video on the list bore the title “Early Life”. She clicked on it and began to watch.



Hi again! Since you are watching this, I believe you have watched my first video. In that, I told you who and what an Influencer is, and what people like us actually do. I also gave you a gist of our lives, and what it means if one of us decides to quit. I know you must have lots of questions, but bear with me. I will tell you everything.

As you can see, this video is titled “Early Life”. So I will tell you about my childhood days, the way I remember them. You must already know a little about your grandfather. That he didn’t stay with us long. And that he was a jeweller par excellence. He was quite well known and respected in his circles for his excellent salesmanship and wit. Most customers who visited his shop ended up buying more jewellery than they planned to.

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That shouldn't be a surprise. After all, he was my father and shared half my genes. But he wasn't strong enough to be considered an Influencer. Still, unknowingly, he utilized the little power he had in convincing people to buy his ornaments. He was extraordinarily successful in his business.

Do you get it now? Even the weakest of Influencers are capable of being excellent salesmen. Anyway, our family was wealthy and we lived lavishly, but all that changed with the untimely death of my father. He had amassed enough wealth in his time that we could continue to lead a decent middle-class life, but nothing more than that.

As a child, I was very demanding and greedy. All I wanted was to possess everything in the world. My mother bought every toy I pointed at. Our relatives used to say that she was spoiling me. Told her not to accede to all of my demands. But nothing could change the status I enjoyed under her guardianship. People thought that I was way too pampered. And they blamed my mother for that. Yes, I was spoiled, but my mother wasn't the one responsible for it.

You see, even at the early age of five, I had become strong enough to influence people. My mother was helpless. It was me who, by the sheer power of my will, was forcing my mother to relent to my demands. Combined with the excessive love she had for me, her only child, she did nothing but say yes to my every insistence.

Imagine a child raised in such an environment. My worldview was wholly impaired and twisted. I thought I could have anything. As a result, I grew more and more confident and assertive.

Despite my brazen arrogance, I was able to make friends easily. They all succumbed to my charm. Even at that tender age, my peers looked up to me. I was a born leader. I used my skill for petty objectives. Mine was always the first turn to bat. It was me who decided the rules of the game. And when I said playtime was over, it was over.

With time, I became more and more powerful. I soon grew strong enough to influence more children. Soon, I was the centre of the attraction in my class — a true cynosure. I was only an average student, yet people looked at me with awe. I had nothing up my sleeves. I couldn't sing or draw well. I couldn't dance or debate. I had no exceptional skills whatsoever. I was just an ordinary guy who had one thing that people didn't know about. I was an Influencer in the making. And my powers were strong enough for me to be popular and respected.

I still remember the days when I was able to convince my teachers to give additional marks to me during re-checking of the answer sheets. I knew I could increase my scores by asking, so I did it even more. Other children were jealous of me. Still, they were in awe of this ability of mine. As a result, I got spoilt more and more. According to me, the world was created solely for me. I thought that this universe was obliged to please me. My mind was, therefore, seriously messed up. All I thought of was myself. I was a narcissist in the making. And I thought I could make anyone submit to my will. But such excessive confidence, such hubris and conceit, didn't last long.

In 1996, a beautiful girl named Kavya joined our class. Her father was a government employee who had been transferred to our city. I was so enamoured by her beauty that I wanted to have her as my friend. It was puppy love, as people say, for at that

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tender age, I was oblivious to the games adults play. All I wanted was to be with her.

I tried talking to her. I made sincere efforts to impress her. But I didn't succeed. Every child in my class listened to me but she didn't. To her, I was a fool who was constantly pestering her. For the first time in my life, I had failed. For the first time, I couldn't possess what I wanted. You must have guessed why. Yes, she was an Influencer in the making too. Definitely stronger than me at that point. Anyway, she moved away to another city a year later.

I don't know what happened of her. I never saw her at WIS. Never heard of her, ever. Probably she is no more. Or maybe she is a member of WIS in some other nation. What I know for sure is, had she become an Influencer, she would definitely be stronger than me. Anyway, a year of her presence changed me forever. I was no longer the brash kid who wanted everything. I became more disciplined and humbler. I understood that the world was not for my pleasure alone. For the first time, I realized I couldn't bend people for whatever I wanted.

I don't know if you have understood by now how Influencers work. But if you think that we can control people, you are wrong. We can't make them do whatever we want. We are not the mind-controllers you see in paranormal movies, books and comics. What we can actually do is weaken one's stand about something.

Every person has willpower, which differs in strength. Some people have a weak willpower, and others have one that is way too strong. And all people, regardless of their willpower, have a stand on issues that matter to them. For some issues, the stand is strong; for others, the stand is weak. For example, an Influencer can't make an unknown woman to undress (If you are a man and fancy about such stuff) as for that her stand is

strong. Extremely strong. But you can definitely make her say yes if you ask her for one little dance on the dance floor. The point is, humans have frail willpower for the things they consider less important and mundane, and as the issue becomes more and more important to them, they are less likely to relent, even in the presence of Influencers like us.

I didn't know what Influencers were until I was contacted by WIS. I had no inkling about my special abilities. All I believed was that I had a charming and dynamic personality. I didn't know why people agreed with me on issues that were not important. I just understood one thing—that I was better than others.

After my failure with Kavya, I stopped using my abilities regularly. At the same time, my mother asked me to attend some lectures by a local Guruji. She felt that they would change me and prepare me better for the future. I agreed and started attending his lectures. His discourses put me into my rightful place. His teachings about ideas contained in religious texts made me a little modest. He was a determinist and propounded that one can't escape one's destiny. "We are nothing but puppets," he constantly reminded his followers. He asked us not to worry and to stop trying to control everything around us. He urged us to let it all go. And I did as he said.

Yes, he was a sort of Influencer too. In fact, all godmen, all gurus are hiding a little Influencer inside each of them. Perhaps they don't know. But it is the very reason why they are successful and are able to assuage the troubles of their followers.

Not just godmen; all those who are successful in their social lives have this power of influencing people to some extent. But most of these people don't know the real reason behind their success. The WIS does not care about such people. They don't

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care about those who have already established themselves as leaders. What they are looking for are young people; those who are totally oblivious of their potential and have not yet made their presence known in society.

Someone is knocking. I can't continue recording this video any longer. You see, this is not our house. It is an apartment your mother does not know about; you can call it my lair or my secret retreat. It's where I come when I seek solitude.

Your mother still doesn't suspect anything. I know it is not right to keep her in the dark. I know it is not right to lie about official trips and visits. But it is for her own safety.

Sorry, I have to end this video. Someone is at the door, and he certainly doesn't possess the virtue of patience. I will resume once again from where I am leaving off. Goodbye, my son or my daughter, whoever and whatever you are. See you next time.



With that, the video ended. Never in her dreams had Shreya ever thought that her life would take a turn like that. She couldn't believe whatever she had seen.

Oh my God, this is for real, she thought. He is not joking. I wish I had never seen this forbidden folder. So many secrets and I hadn't had even a slight inkling about any of them.

She stood up and walked towards the balcony. Her attention was drawn to the park in front of her building by the loud voices of excited children. It was the summer holidays, and there was no school for them to attend.

"Until now, my life was just like these little kids," she said aloud, sighing. "Knowing nothing about this world, these

children enjoy each and every moment. Not everything in this world should be known. Yes, not everything in this world is worth learning about.” Tears gushed out of her eyes. “Perhaps that’s why Aditya hid this secret from me. But how could he?” She boiled with indignation. “How could he not tell his wife? Am I not trustworthy enough?” Wiping her tears, she sniffled. “God! Aditya must have felt so lonely all this time. Carrying the burden of this secret and not being able to tell anyone.”

She looked at her watch. Just forty-five minutes had passed since Aditya left their house. She had seven more hours at her disposal, and she wanted to learn everything she could. Taking quick steps, she returned to the table and played the next video, “Early life continued”.

About the author

Abhaidev is the pen name of Mayank Chandna, an MDI Gurgaon alumnus and the author of the much-loved novel, *That Thing About You*. After working for a while in an investment bank, he took the plunge and quit that boring job of his to venture into the exciting world of writing, something he always wanted to do.

His penchant for continental philosophy and craze for progressive house and indie music has nettled his simple parents. He is an avid reader and devours classics and science books. Like most people with a DSLR, he loves flaunting his non-existent photography skills on social media platforms.

Abhaidev loves challenging his limits and believes that there is nothing nobler in this world than possessing an intense desire to learn. He seeks transcendence in the practice of art and hopes to pen down stories which are not run-of-the-mill.

‘The Influencer’ is his second novel.

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