

## **Fabulous.**

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Queen B sat on a gold-plated throne looking every bit like a ruling monarch. A cigarette was perched upon his lips and in one hand a half drunken glass of brandy and soda. He was flicking through the first draft of a biography some ambitious new author had written. The cover was red and in huge gold glitter was the one word title, Fabulous. Queen B nodded, he approved. It was his birthday, his fortieth, again. If truth be told this was the fourth time a celebration like this had taken place but no one dared question the age of this ageing diva. 'Hey girl, fetch me some chicken,' he shouted as he clicked his fingers at some nervous looking PR assistant. The assistant fled. The other figures in the room just chuckled to themselves. They had heard it all before. Queen B was throwing one of his 'Look at me I want all the attention,' strops and they took no notice. It was old news. He then clicked his fingers once more to get some order in the room and proceeded to read aloud from his book to his audience of admirers. All they had to do was stop, gaze and listen. Those were his only commands.

'Chapter One, A weekend in 1972. Benton had enough of home life in his native Los Angeles when a friend suggested he travel to San Francisco for the weekend. Benton instantly fell in love with the city, the lights and most of all, the men. By the following Wednesday he was completely moved in to the city that would be his home. Some say he arrived in 1970, others a few years later, but whatever the exact date Benton had found a home where he could live the life he wanted exactly the way he wanted. He found the freedom exhilarating and in no time found himself surrounded by like minded friends.'

Queen B tutted. 'No bitch calls me Benton.'

He continued.

'Benton moved around from flop-house to flop-house where he enjoyed his status as a young hippie. One day he found his way to a rehearsal of a drag performance group Handbag. While surrounded by the typical chaos that passed for a rehearsal, he sat at the piano and tapped out a tune demanding silence before he continued. Soon everyone on stage was standing around the piano listening to the androgynous young queen deliver a simple version *Heartache Baby*. He quickly found acceptance and soon he was singing as a featured performer every Saturday night in The Handbag Show at the Roxy.'

'The rest they say is history,' Queen B commented before slamming the book and rising from his chair to a rapturous applause. He didn't mind, he knew the praise wasn't quite genuine, he would have done the same years back to some other unsuspecting disco diva but even so, despite the falseness of the flattery, he lapped it up.

And so, the rest they say is history. After the Handbag show, there were more gigs, more claims to fame, and continuing sexual encounters with wannabe admirers mostly backstage at a gig or if they were privileged, back in his San Fran attic studio. Then one night a vision of glamour came as a famous PR face in the crowd. There followed some serious flirting, a few negotiations, some compromise, the sacking of his backing singers and long term manager but on the plus side assurances of millions of dollars to be earned if he sold his soul and signed on the dotted line of the recording contract with Joystick Records. He signed. Then came the much talked about debut single, a billboard dance chart hit which was called *Fame* followed by a second hit single *Success*. There was a twelve minute disco remix constructed by the man of the moment Justin Fox, a celebrated DJ at the Minstrel Club. Justin was born in Buffalo, New York and during his teenage years, became a successful drummer with local amateur bands before attending University where he studied Literature. In 1971, at the age of 21, Justin moved to San Francisco where he studied music, specifically the use of synthesizers and became a DJ. He created a remix where dancers on the floor were instructed to light matches, sniff poppers and wave their arms in the air as the chorus came to a dramatic cowbell finale. 'I am success,' Queen B would rhythmically chant, 'I am the best the business.'

Then came the album laughingly and tongue in cheek called *Fame At Last* there were fantastic reviews, a nationwide tour, celebration parties, more kisses, more champagne and glittering awards and the recording of what would become that all important difficult second album *Rise*. He decided he was the new mama of disco. There was the tragic but often aired hilarious TV interview on the Night Show. 'I don't know if I can recreate the magic of my debut, but I will try,' Queen B bleated while waving handkerchiefs to an adoring crowd. Naturally they all screamed back. 'Do you want it?' he would cry to an audience who would scream back yes! Mr. television presenter appeared unimpressed. 'Mama can't hear you, DO YOU WANT IT?' he would belt back. Cue dramatic over acting applause, open stretched arms encased in an assortment of gypsy bangles and fake tears. The host still appeared unimpressed. 'I love you all,' he would utter as he stumbled off set intoxicated by love,

affection and cheap gin running backstage where he be discovered eating fried chicken and candy bars.

There would be continued success, luxurious fame, cash spent on jewels, fashions and drugs. This was the video dream where neon lights would embrace the disco vibe of his leading hit single *Disco Heaven* from his third album he called *Star*. 'I called it Star, because I am one,' he would coo. No one argued the point. The video would see him walk aimlessly around a darkened isolated nightclub decorated with fake palm trees and tinsel, miming over backing tapes, dramatically waving his arms, giving sudden camp hand gestures and winking to the camera whilst wearing an ill-fitting red wig and Chinese kimono. He knew what the audience wanted and he gave them everything.

But then there came a different time, a time of sadness, the death of a lover, a difficult fourth album *Dust*. The album sleeve featured Queen B, face covered with white powder resembling a geisha girl but with tears in his eyes looking aimlessly from a taxi into the quiet streets of downtown San Francisco. People complained. 'This isn't disco,' cried one agitated clone. There was rejection, a flop, a cancellation and a miserable drunken cabaret appearance where he fell off the stage in a vodka stupor. After intoxicated stage fights and backstage bitch scenes, came the weight gains, the endless diets and dangerous midnight sexual liaisons followed by more comfort eating. Buckets of chicken and burgers would be ordered and consumed. Invitations returned and appearances cancelled; there would be no curtain up tonight. After months of pill popping, double cheeseburgers, cocaine parties and cheap cider binges, there would be silence as the crowds dispersed and a new younger hipper sexy crowd had no idea who this drunken fat old mess was. There was one scathing article in a newspaper, 'Where is he now?' some ageing queeny journalist would write. An equally energetic bitchy young queer wrote back 'Probably eating.'

There would be one attempted failed comeback, the *Back To Where It All Began* tour, only the past was never the same as no one came. His original backing singers snubbed his request to join him, the costumes never fitted and the vocals were tragic. Joystick Records cancelled their contract. There were no millions, what was made had been spent on sex, drugs, cheap champagne and even cheaper friends. There would be continual disastrous reviews assisted by daily drug taking, dirty dark room sex, scandal and news reports, more loss, more heartache, more friends dying, more funerals, too many funerals. 'Where has everyone gone?' he once said, 'why have all the beautiful men died, I can't stand another fucking

funeral.' For once, many people agreed with his sentiments. A proposed album *Back To Basics* was circulated amongst record companies but no one was keen, no one wanted a drunken has been on their books and no one returned his telephone calls. It was time for a change, it was rehab time, it was checking in time, it was now or never time.

And then, just when everyone thought they had heard the last, there was a new sunrise, a new dawn, a new awakening. The much heralded comeback, the song that everyone wanted to hear, the record that was destined to be a success which he called *Anthem* the dedication was simple, 'This is for all those names embroidered on quilts, this is our anthem, we need to reach out and rejoice, and we need a parade.'

The inevitable #1 hit comeback album *Parade* followed by the greatest hits revival, then the documentary. 'I never left you all, I just had a little downtime,' he would laugh showing off his new slim line in a figure hugging brown and purple leather corduroy trouser suit. There were flowers, there was love, it had all returned, he had found eternal happiness not with a star gazer but with a garage mechanic called James. He collected new friends, some were fake and others real, it didn't matter so much now, he was back, back where he belonged. And now, someone had written it all down, all his up, up, ups and his down, down, downs. It was all there in black and white.

Where he had come from, what he had done what he had said and what had been said about him. Some of it as fabulous, most of it was nasty, Benton denied various claims and yet between the lines, everyone knew, it was the truth.

As the final paragraph concluded, No one knew what the B stood for though many said simply B was for bitch of the highest level, he quickly learned how it felt to have the total attention of a whole nightclub, and he loved it.