

Chapter Six

Al's Cancer

Al started to experience back pain in 1968 while playing golf. I did not know he was having a problem. He had seen several of his friend's doctors since most people had back pain in those days.

His pain got so bad that he was unable to drive. I became his chauffeur and drove him into the city so he could work for a few hours a day. A friend suggested he see a doctor on Park Avenue in the Bronx who treated the Kennedys. This doctor started him on a series of injections. After the second injection, Al spiked a high fever while at work and went straight to another doctor in New Jersey. This doctor explained, "When an adult gets a high temperature from this medication it is a strong indication of something in the Kidney. He ordered an x-ray.

I got the worst possible news when I got the results from the x-ray. He told me Al had cancer in his kidney which spread to the spine and there was nothing which could be done for him. He was admitted to Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, New Jersey, for tests.

After the tests he went to a Urologist in New York who put him in Presbyterian Hospital with a plan to remove the kidney. Al had such a bad reaction to this plan and the surgery was never performed. Instead they used radiation treatment to try and stop the growth of the tumor. I was so upset about not doing the surgery. I had hoped the cancer would be removed with it and Al would recover. When I questioned the Doctor, he told me it would not make a difference in the outcome with or without the surgery. I asked why he would consider the surgery in the first place. He had no answer.

The radiation made him very sick. It was a year since I got the bad news that Al was going to die. I would lie in bed at home next to his hospital bed not knowing how I was

going to pay the mortgage and support my boys. The only thing keeping me going off the deep end of anxiety was the hope that God meant for a different life for me and the boys after Al was gone. It was a terrible time for all of us. Only a few people in the family knew Al had cancer. I did not tell the boys or Al's parents.

Richard was 21 years old and in danger of being drafted into the Army and having to go to Vietnam. Luckily, a friend was able to get him into the National Guard, which might have saved his life. After six weeks of basic training, he came home on leave and looked amazing. He was so thin and in the best shape of his life. He really did look and felt great. I was so pleased and proud of him. There was a definite improvement in him after that experience.

He asked me what was wrong with his father and I felt he was old enough to handle the truth. I told him. We both decided not to tell Spencer and Bennett at that time.

Al was not able to put his affairs in order since he didn't know he was going to die. He owned a sportswear business in the city with two partners and I was not aware of that I would be compensated for Al's share.

One morning he was having trouble breathing when he woke up and was taken once again to Valley Hospital. He was put on a metal framed bed which could turn him over easily, so he could rest on his stomach. They need to have him on his stomach to treat his bed sores.

I took care of him the best I could. I bathed him, injected him with morphine, cut his hair, and had him grow a mustache so he wouldn't see the changes in his face. I wanted to keep the knowledge of his fait a secret. I did not think he could handle knowing what he really had.

When he came home from the hospital the metal framed bed came with him. I hired a nurse to help take care of him. The doctors did not want me to take him home and suggested a few alternatives. None of the alternatives were acceptable to me and I took him home against the advice of the medical staff.

Our nurse was so wonderful. She was such a blessing from God. She came at just the right time and was very comforting. The most beautiful comment she had for me was

when she referred to me as “an Angel” and that God would reward me for taking such good care of Al.

I told Spencer and Bennett about their father’s true illness a week before he died. I wanted to help prepare them as much as possible. Bennett made it a little easier for me by asking, “When is dad going to get better?” It helped me to get such a painful conversation started.

Al died on June 30, 1970. Al’s death had a dramatic effect on Richard. He had always struggled with his relationship with his father and never got the chance to prove himself. I believe that would have been a great achievement for him if he could have had that opportunity. I believe he could have benefited greatly from Al at that point in his life just after the discipline he gained in the National Guard.

Spencer was never one to show his emotions, but he was very affected by his father’s death. He does not verbalize his feelings, but it was evident he would miss Al very much. He spent more time with Al during his sickness than Richard and Bennett. He has a huge heart and it must have been broken in those days.

Bennett was sixteen when Al died which was a tremendous blow to him. He was closest to Al because they both shared their love for sports. We had season tickets to the New York Jets and Giants and Bennett went to the games with Al almost every Sunday. When Al died, Bennett lost his sports buddy and stopped going to the games.

The year before he died, Al was so proud to go to Bennett’s football games to see him play. It meant a great deal to Bennett to have his father there.

