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THE FACE OF COURAGE

Badly mauled by a bear, Allena Hansen was ready to die—then her dogs arrived **BY HOWARD BREUER**

The bear was on her before she even knew what was happening. Allena Hansen was outside working on her mountaintop ranch in Caliente, Calif., when a young black bear leaped out from a thicket of willow trees, grabbed Hansen by the ears, bit into her face and spat out her teeth. "It sounded like when I bite into a stalk of celery, only infinitely more resonant," recalls Hansen, 57, who at 5'1" and 105 lbs. was easily overpowered. In those first panicked seconds, her efforts seemed futile and she essentially gave

up hope. "I didn't mind dying. I wasn't fighting it," she tells PEOPLE. Then her two dogs jumped in to defend her and she heard her mastiff Deke yelp in pain as he battled the bear. "I thought, If Deke is willing to die for me," says Hansen, "the least I could do is try to escape."

Miraculously, she did. And though the July 22 attack left her horribly disfigured, she has since made an astonishing recovery and emerged even stronger for the ordeal. "I look at them as my Sheena the Warrior



THE AFTERMATH After being bitten and clawed by a black bear like the one to the right, Hansen had 10 hours of surgery and received 1,000 stitches. Her face "was like a jigsaw puzzle, and not all the pieces fit together," her doctor says.



Hansen was saved from the bear by her mastiff Deke and her Irish wolfhound Archimedes.

"I don't wish the bear ill. I just don't want it to attack again"
—ALLENA HANSEN

Princess scars," she says defiantly. Hansen still vividly recalls how, seconds into the attack, she came eye to eye with the bear—"as close as a kiss." The reclusive rancher jabbed her thumbnails into the huge dark eyes, and the bear released her long enough for her to call her dogs. As Deke and Archimedes, her Irish wolfhound, vaulted into the fray, Hansen escaped and stumbled 200 yards down the hillside. But bleeding profusely and her vision almost completely gone, she couldn't see her car. Then Archimedes caught up and led the way. When she reached her SUV, Deke, who had managed to get away, was waiting and shuddering, seemingly more frightened by her appearance than by the bear. Together they drove three miles down a winding dirt road to the local firehouse. "She walked in with half her face hanging off," recalls Kern County fire captain Curt Merrell. "One firefighter threw her to the floor and grabbed her flesh and threw it back on her face."

Despite Hansen's condition, Merrell recalls, she displayed an uncanny calm, rattling off all kinds of infor-

mation, down to her UCLA patient identification number. She asked that they tell her son where she was and that someone look after her dogs (who both escaped with minor injuries). "I know some people who cut their finger and faint, and here's a woman with half her face gone, with the presence of mind to give her Social Security number," Merrell recalls. "I believe it was her will to live that kept her going." (Trackers later pursued the bear for three days, but failed to catch it. Authorities have no idea why it attacked.)

At UCLA Medical Center, Hansen's injuries were about the worst the plastic surgery team had ever seen. The bear had torn away her jaw, lips and earlobes and laid open her forehead; the bone underneath had the imprint of the bear's claw. "You could barely tell she was human," says Dr. Kimberly Lee, the team's leader. "When I looked at her cheek, I could look straight through into her mouth." Lee says the team felt an extra desire to reward Hansen's courage: "I wanted her to wake up and have a face that would not make

her regret that she survived."

After surgery involving dozens of doctors and about 1,000 stitches, plus several follow-up surgeries, Hansen looks like a scarred but presentable version of her old self. Unable to smile, crease her forehead or drink without dribbling, she will need more surgery to reconstruct her teeth and jaw and repair nerve damage. But her son Alec, 24, says he's used to seeing his mom rebound from injuries—often after tumbling off horses. "It's going to take more than some punk little bear to get rid of her," he says.

A lifelong animal lover, Hansen says she doesn't wish the bear harm. "I have no feelings towards it. It belongs here, it lives here. But until it starts paying property tax, I'm going to assert my dominance!" She's writing a book about her experience to let people know that even when things look bleakest they can turn out all right. "Given how much misfortune and terror there is," she says, "I tell people that if a little old lady can make it through a bear attack, you can too." ●

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