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The Skycatcher

by Lori Teresa Yearwood

"Don't forget to enjoy the view!" shouts Melody Beattie seconds before she leaps from the plane.

"All the lessons you need to know about letting go and owning your power are in skydiving."

When you're plummeting 13,000 feet through the clouds at 120 miles an hour, you basically have two options: Freeze in terror and hope you don't die, or breathe, find your bearings, and pull the rip cord before you hit the ground.

"Even God can't save you if you don't pull your own rip cord," says Beattie, 53, the woman who turned codependency into a household word with her best-seller, Codependent No More. Over the tumultuous course of her own life, she has almost hit the ground several times.

Beattie started getting drunk when she was 12, sneaking home from school on lunch hours and downing shots of Jack Daniels. She doesn't blame it on her broken home (her father left when she was 3) or the fact that she was dragged into a church basement at the age of 4 by a man who did things to her she has never been able to remember fully.

"I started drinking," she writes in Playing It by Heart "because it was love at first sip. Or gulp."

By the time Beattie was 24, she was walking around with cocaine-packed syringes in her boots and had overdosed on drugs at least five times. She remembers waking up in her emergency room and looking into the horrified eyes of her

mother and the solemn eyes of a priest, who was giving her last rites. "I tore off the heart monitor and raced out of there, chasing my next high," she says.

A year later she found herself on the roof of a drugstore in Mora, Minnesota, stoned. When she tried to pry a vent open, the alarm went off and suddenly the town "lit up like a Fourth of July" -- dogs started barking and people were screaming. Beattie went to the side of the roof to see what all the fuss was about. The cops told her to put her hands above her head.

The next morning the judge banged the gavel, leaned toward Beattie, and asked her: "Do you understand that you are responsible for your own behavior?" Actually, she had never thought of that. He offered her a choice: the state correctional institution for women for five years or drug treatment at Willmar State Hospital -- "for as long as it took." Beattie chose rehab, figuring there would be more drugs there. She was right. One night she scored 12 amphetamines, telling herself she would take only one. But by bedtime she was strung out and bug-eyed – she had swallowed them all.

"I sat on the edge of my bed, and I looked up at the ceiling and said, 'God, I don't know if you're there or if you care, but if you are and there's a program that will help me stop using, please help me find it." That was the turning point. Afterward, she began talking about her feelings instead of repressing them. She started to take responsibility for her actions and apologize for her mistakes.

Once out of rehab, Beattie married and had two children, Shane and Nichole. But her husband drank – a lot. Beattie needled him, lectured him, begged him to stop. He still drank, leading Beattie to learn about a little-known concept called codependency – her "addiction" to him – and to finally understand that she was helpless to change anyone but herself. After ten years she got divorced. Living on food stamps, with no college degree, she managed to talk her way into the *Stillwater Gazette*, a local Minnesota newspaper, and land a job writing articles for $25 apiece. By the age of 38 she had penned *Codependent No More*. Although initially rejected by 20 publishers, the book sold five million copies after hitting the stores in 1986.

By all accounts, she had made it. Then in 1991 her 12-year-old son, Shane, was killed while skiing. Once again Beattie surrendered to the pain. The grief was overwhelming. She knew she had to pull her rip cord and began by doing crossword puzzles at her kitchen table. It was the one thing she knew might get her brain to focus and help her come to life again.

"You can have it all and lose it all – or lose it all and get it back. And each time you have to take responsibility for yourself," says Beattie. She skydives twice a month to practice the lesson that has helped her survive and has now written 13 books to give others hope. "It's no good if the healing stops with us," she says. "We've got to pass it on." ■