

# The Aerial Sling Manual

## Volume 1

A step-by-step reference guide for teachers  
and students of any hammock program

preview

Rebekah Leach

## DISCLAIMER

This manual is not intended for laypersons to pick up and start learning on their own. All use (and misuse) of this manual is done so AT YOUR OWN RISK.

Check with your healthcare professional before beginning any exercise program, especially one involving inverting and going into positions that cause pressure to certain places on the body. For example, those with heart conditions should not invert, as it is a dangerous situation that can cause stroke, heart attack, dizzy spells, or further injury, including death. As with any exercise program, there is always a risk of injury. Also, working at any given height adds an increased risk of injury, including paralysis or death.

## BE SAFE

The top 10 safety precautions to heed:

1. Start by taking live lessons from a professional aerialist. Use this book for reference only.
2. Have rigging installed and inspected by a rigging professional. Each time before you practice, visually check your rigging and equipment. Perform thorough periodic inspections.
3. Always practice over a mat appropriate to the height level you are working at.
4. Never practice alone. Always have a spotter.
5. Always perform a solid warm-up prior to mounting an aerial apparatus.
6. Practice safe progression. (If you do not have the required strength, do not attempt the move.)
7. Don't make guesses. If you are not sure if something is going to "work," don't try it!
8. Focus on injury prevention exercises & proper shoulder placement early in your training.
9. Always practice new moves low to the ground.
10. Listen to your body. Take care of it, and it will take care of you.

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This book may be purchased with bulk discounts. For information, send an e-mail to: [info@aerialdancing.com](mailto:info@aerialdancing.com).  
Corresponding video content is available on [AerialDancing.com](http://AerialDancing.com).  
The moves in this book are part of Born to Fly Curriculum.  
More information at [www.BorntoFlyCurriculum.com](http://www.BorntoFlyCurriculum.com).

When practicing aerial, always perform warm-up exercises before attempting any individual exercises. Also, when practicing aerial, always do so in the presence of a trained professional, with load-tested aerial equipment hanging from load-tested rigging, which has been set up and inspected frequently by rigging professionals, along with crash pads underneath the apparatus. It is recommended that you check with your doctor or healthcare provider before commencing any exercise program, especially one as rigorous as aerial.

Whilst every care has been taken in the preparation of this material, there is a real chance of injury in execution of the movements described in this book. The Publisher and all persons involved in the making of this manual will not accept responsibility for injury to any degree, including death, to any person as a result of participation in the activities described in this manual. Purchase or use of this document constitutes agreement to this effect. Furthermore, rigging of aerial equipment is not discussed in this manual. Consult a professional rigger when it comes to using any hanging equipment.

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# Preface

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When I opened my first studio in 2008, sling was nowhere near as popular as it is today. I was teaching silks classes, but I had many students who were struggling with the basics of climbing, etc. Someone showed me how to tie a slipknot and I soon discovered all the modifications of silks moves that could be done on the knot. Playing with the knot allowed students to easily transition back and forth between climbing on the silks and playing on the knot, which was much more readily accessible for the general population. I used the knot as a place to play and create, dance and exercise.

When sling became a thing, I was more than ready! I took all my vocabulary from the knot and quickly started flying on sling. I was excited to have adjustable points installed in our studio that we opened in 2016 in Castle Rock, Colorado. This allows us to have slings set to any height at any moment, which means that we can have all kinds of back-to-back classes without having to worry about slings being too high for a beginner to mount or too low for an advanced student. Needless to say, I have fallen in love with teaching sling!

If you have been following my books lately, you may have noticed that sling has been sneaking into many books. For example, it made quite the appearance in the second volume of *The Aerial Rope Manual Series*. I feel that sling lends itself so easily to supplemental training for various apparatuses, so I use it frequently to train aerial in general. I hope this series will reveal the great treasures that sling has been hiding and by Volume 4, you'll see why I'm so in love with sling!

This is the first time where the level of the book will exactly match up with the volume number. The fact that I am now running a studio has largely influenced this decision. My goal is to have this be the case with all future manuals, on any apparatus. The entire curriculum that is outlined in these books and in our online video



*This move is located on page 83.*

library is called Born to Fly Curriculum. It is open for anyone and everyone to use! (However, we ask that you not claim to be certified unless you have been through our extensive and wonderful certification program. Find more online at [www.BornToFlyTeachers.com](http://www.BornToFlyTeachers.com).)

## Access the Video Library

A resource that is available right from the comfort of your own home is [AerialDancing.com](http://AerialDancing.com) (which is now [www.BornToFlyCurriculum.com](http://www.BornToFlyCurriculum.com) as well). With a paying subscription you can access all of the moves in this book demonstrated through video by industry experts. If you're a visual learner like me, you will appreciate seeing the move in live action. This can be helpful for quick review before or after classes.

Happy Flying,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebekah Leach". The signature is written in a cursive style and is located on a white background.

# Introduction

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Sling has quickly become a very popular aerial apparatus. Many beginners find it less intimidating and more approachable. Studios around the world are using sling for a variety of class-types including everything from aerial yoga to cirque fitness classes to more dancy classes and then just good ol' plain aerial. It can easily be used for very gentle classes, or it can get quite intense. This manual series outlines a curriculum that is designed to be classical sling in terms of its place in the circus line-up of aerial apparatuses. Many of the movement vocabulary has been taken from apparatuses such as trapeze, which has a very long history within circus movement. Whenever it made sense to do so, I kept the same names of poses. Sling helps prepare a student for all of aerial, most directly silks because you are literally using the same apparatus; it's just tied differently. Sling can also be studied as an apparatus in its own right, and by the time you get to Level 4, I'm confident you will find appreciation for sling as its own athletic art form.

At our studio, we want people to have fun at any level, but we ultimately want to keep people training safely. And it is not safe to progress a student to the next level when they are not ready. If you have a student learning drops who does not have proper body awareness or lacks sufficient core strength, this is a huge risk factor. Even if there is no big accident, they can add up small strains on the muscles that create long-term strain and overuse injuries to the body, not to mention the whiplash-symptoms when landing a drop without proper core support. A well-built curriculum is one that is designed to minimize injury and build the body progressively, so that when a student gets to each new phase in the curriculum, they are ready for the challenge.

# About This Book

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The first two chapters cover the basis of what I call Level 0 in the Born to Fly Curriculum. It introduces a student to placing weight on the apparatus, getting them used to concepts such as mounting, inverting, transitioning, climbing, folding, and weight-shifting. This is perfect as an intro-to-aerial course where students are assessed and can then be placed into a course that is appropriate to their starting strength. You may have a high-flying gymnast or a person who has been sedentary and never worked out in their life. Both need to learn good technique for getting the sling to their sacrum when they invert for the first time. They should have equal opportunity to excel at your studio, but they should not be expected to work through the curriculum at the same pace.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this book make-up what I call Level 1 in the Born to Fly Curriculum. These moves are not as critical to the developing aerialist, and in some cases may be skipped. For example, if I had the two students mentioned above, it is likely that high-flying gymnast would skip to my Level 2 course, after completing the milestone moves that are discussed in the last chapter. My never-worked-out-needs-core-development student would join my classic Level 1 classes. I have many recreational adult students who have enjoyed being at Level 0-1 for years now. The variety of moves and approaches at this level must remain creative and broad to keep these students engaged. The curriculum narrows as you go up in level, because you spend more time focusing on training a few hard moves. Vocabulary building is less important, because you had the first few levels for that. Make sure to build a pyramid with a broad base so that it's nice and sturdy. Now, let's start building!



# How to Use This Book

Look for these helpful boxes throughout the book.

## Purple Boxes: Extra Information

Look for troubleshooting tips, fun variations, added shapes, and other ideas in the purple boxes throughout the book.



*To find out what that's wrong with this picture, turn to page 62.*

## Red Boxes: Spotting

While there is much much much more we cover in teacher trainings, we decided to throw in a few spotting tips to remind you that spotters always have a job when it comes to helping students to learn new moves.



## Blue Boxes: Level Up

As a teacher, their job is to diversify their teaching to fit everyone in the room, giving modifications as well as challenges wherever appropriate. We decided to help make the teachers job a little easier by highlighting some connections to upper levels.

## Green Boxes: Exit Strategies

For most of our moves in Level 1, we trust that you know how to safely exit. However, sometimes, it can be helpful to illuminate the pathway. Some exit strategies, such as this exit from catcher's, can highlight an important concept.

## Other Helpful Boxes

At the top of each section, you will find prerequisites for each move. Skill prerequisites are very important as it allows the new knowledge to be built on present knowledge. In this manual, we added an additional prerequisite category that is separate from having a particular skill. Sometimes you may not need any skill to learn a move, but you may need to have

a certain amount of strength or possess a certain amount of body awareness, or have a certain understanding of a concept, etc. We have listed that in its own category. Another category new to this book is a "concept category." It can be helpful when organizing a curriculum to look at what underlying concepts are recurring or connect moves together. The posters at the end of the manual will clump moves into these concept categories.



*To see where this exit came from, see page 37.*



# Backpack Series

**Skill Prerequisite:** None

**Sling Height:** Hip Height or Higher

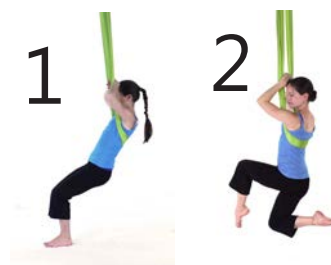
**Starting Point:** Backpack

**Concept Category:** Backpack, Knee Hooking, Transitions

**About this move:** Backpack is a great place for conditioning. Proper placement around the ribcage is key. Often times, students will think that the sling goes under the armpits and they are quickly uncomfortable. Proper cueing for placement will help a student find comfort and the ability to access their core strength more effectively from this position.

## Backpack

**Steps 1-2:** With your feet on the floor, put your arms through the sling like you are putting on a backpack or a sweater. Arch your back when you are first settling in so that the sling ends up lower around your rib cage. As you settle more, crunch forward without letting the sling sink to your armpits. Keep it around the ribcage. Pick up your feet.



## Heron

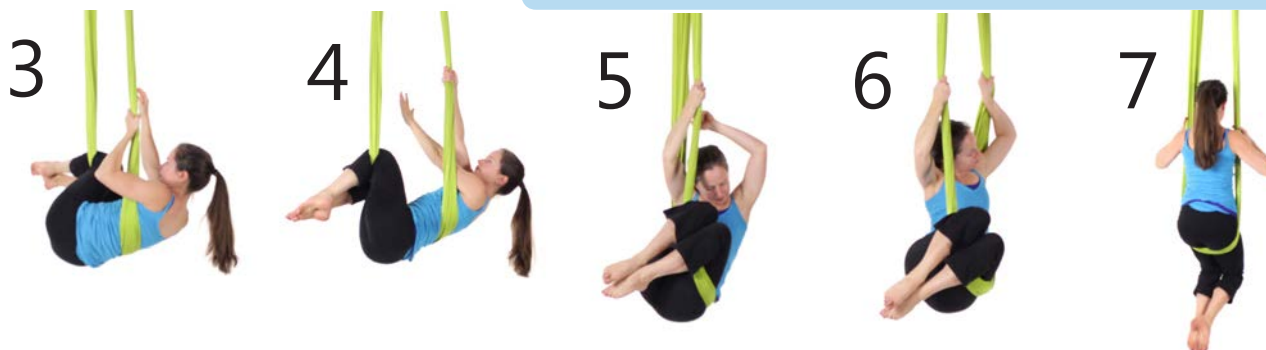
**Steps 1-3:** From backpack, bring your leg through the middle of the sling and rest the back of your calf on the same-side silk (almost a reverse knee hook). Reach for your ankle with the same hand as top leg. Open your knee towards the ground for a wonderful stretch through the legs.



## Double Knee Transition to Sitting (or Horse)

**Steps 1-3:** Begin in backpack. Use your excellent abdominal curl to bring your knee up to your chest and then hook your legs on one side of the sling. Remove your hand from where you just hooked, bringing it over to the other fabric.

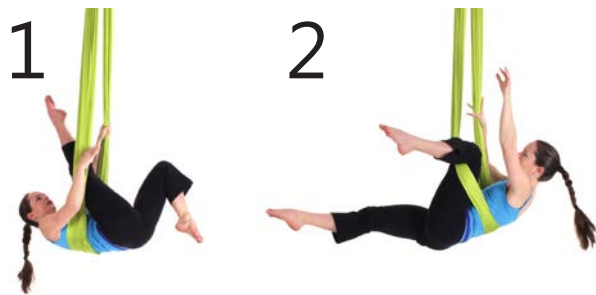
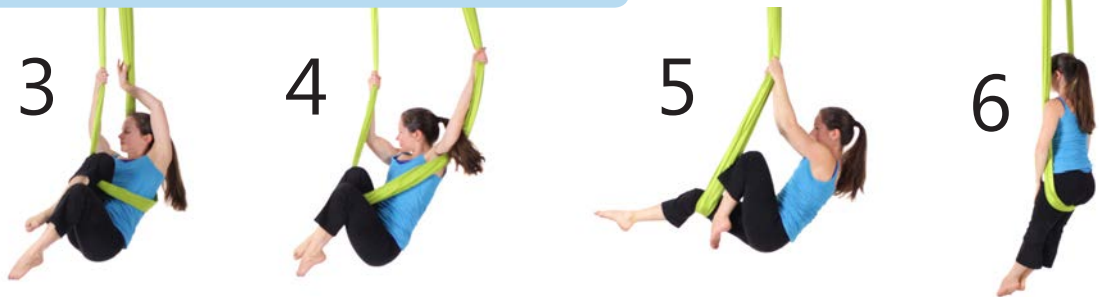
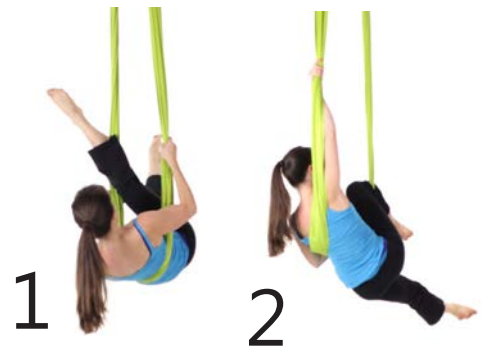
**Steps 4-7:** Thread the inside, bottom arm through to reach for the other silk. Once you have that, transition your head around as you slide into sitting.



## Single Knee Transition to Sitting (or Horse): Opposite Side Knee Hook

**Steps 1-2:** From backpack, hook one leg on the opposite silk.  
(At step 2, you could add a lion pose which will be covered in chapter 3.)

**Steps 3-6:** Flamenco grip your outside hand above your head while you also reach the same-hand-as-hooked-knee over to the silk above your hooked knee. Use the combination of these two hand grips to bring your torso out of the sling and allow your leg to gently slide to center. End by bringing your free leg in the sling and arrive in sitting, or proceed to horse.



## Single Knee Transition to Horse: Same Side Reverse Knee Hook

**Steps 1-2:** From backpack, hook your left leg from the inside to the outside on the left silk (in other words, the same side silk). Transfer your left hand to grab the silk directly above the knee you just hooked.

**Steps 3-4:** Ensure your hands are high enough so that when you pull up, you clear the sling momentarily. During this lift-off moment, straighten your front leg, helping the sling to make its transfer underneath you. When you set yourself back down, the sling will be under the thigh of the hooked leg.

**Step 5-6:** To transition to horse, insert your opposite elbow (as leg on sling) through the sling so that the back of your arm presses into the sling. Release your hand and reach out, completing the transition to horse.

# Backwards Leg Roll-Up

**Skill Prerequisite:** Leg Roll-Up

**Body Focus:** Ankles

**Sling Height:** Low Height

**Starting Point:** Standing

**Concept Category:** Rolling

**About this move:** The backwards leg roll-up is a lower priority move, meaning that some students will move on from this level without having ever learned this move. It is a way to vary the leg roll-up and create interest in the study of sling. There are many ways to play with roll-ups and create shapes. This is another direction to roll.

## Backwards Leg Roll-Up

**Step 1:** Start by holding on to the *same* side as standing foot (notice this is different than the basic leg roll-up) and then lean *behind* the sling (as you would for the basic leg roll-up). Thread your free leg between your base leg and sling.

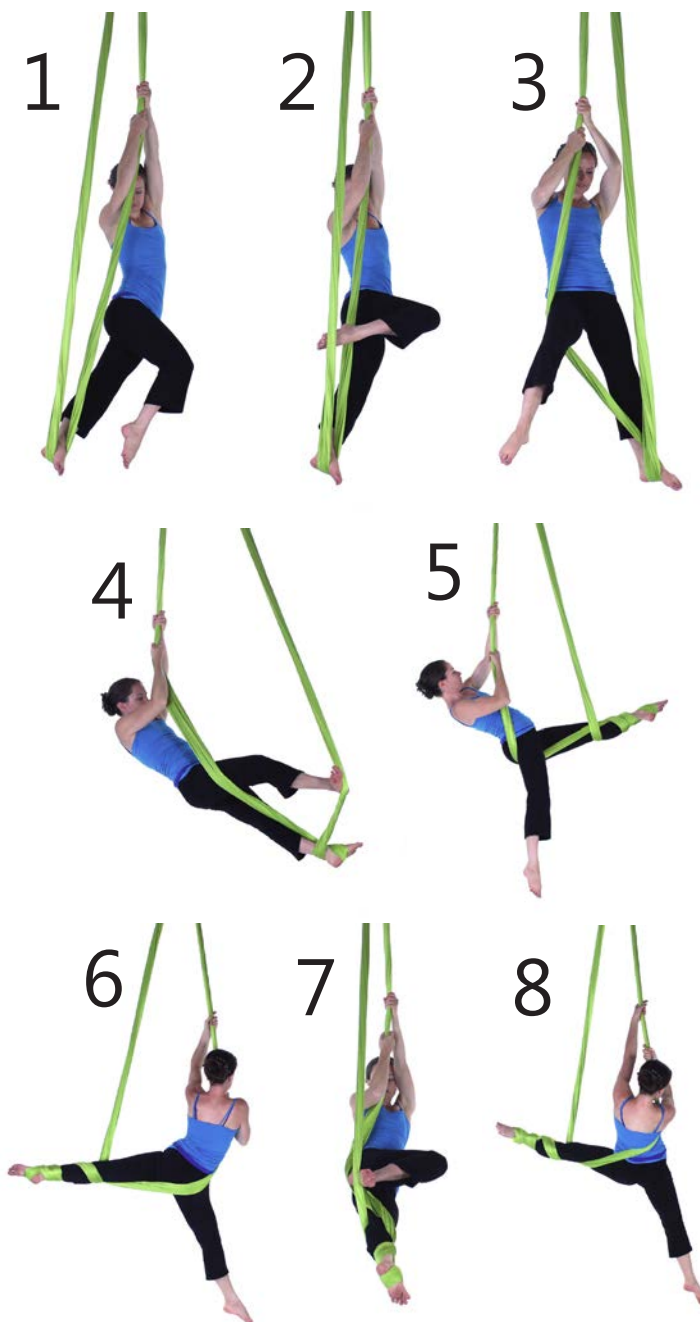
**Steps 2-3:** Place your foot between the silks and then follow the direction your foot is pointing as you bring your entire body between the silks. (As you get more refined in your technique, it helps to emphasize the press of the outer hip at this step.)

**Step 4:** Lean out as you did in the very first roll, turning back to face the sling. Use your free foot to push the sling off your calf and onto your ankle.

**Step 5:** After you push the silk with your free leg, drop your leg back between the silks. Lift your hips as you press this leg back so that your sit bone of the free leg comes to rest on the silk.

**Steps 6-7:** Follow your free leg as you lean out once more, turning towards your base foot enough to place your free foot on the silk that wrapped around your calf. Press it down to your ankle.

**Step 8:** Again, point your toe between the silks and follow with your leg and then your hips. This time, transition your hips so that you sink until the silk is around your sacrum.



...continued from previous page

**Step 9:** Once in this position, explore various ending poses. The classic pose is the Leanna position with the arms and legs reaching out as the body is arched back. The top hand can remain on the sling for balance or it may be released. If you are releasing the hand, make sure you are perfectly balanced first.



Leanna shape

### Exit Strategy #1

**Steps 11-13:** From the last position in step 10 above, place both hands on the closest silk. With your hips facing the ceiling, lift your hips and slide your booty to the side so that you transition off the side of the silk that your sacrum was leaning on a moment ago. Bend your knee as you bring your leg under the fabric and then back inside between the silks. Roll out, much like you would roll out of a basic leg roll-up. Return to standing.



### Exit Strategy #2

**Steps 11-14:** From the last position in step 10 above, place both hands on the closest silk and roll out, leading with the leg in *attitude* (from ballet). After one (or none) roll-outs, take your free leg and push on the sling above your wrapped foot. Push until your foot unravels and return to standing.





# Pull-Over & Tuck Roll Exercise

**Skill Prerequisite:** Hip Hang

**Body Focus:** Hip Crease Position

**Sling Height:** Chest Height+

**Starting Point:** Hip Hang/Standing

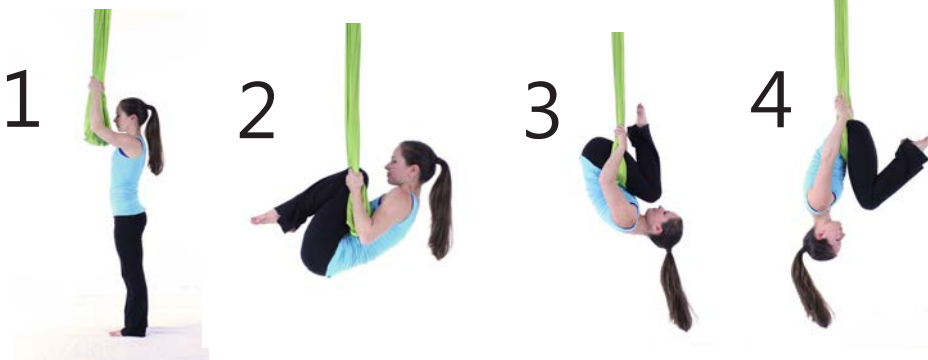
**Concept Category:** Inverting

**About this move:** Before teaching the pull-over, it is important to teach the retrograde of the pull-over: the ball roll-out from hip hang. The reason for this is that it reinforces where the sling goes in hip hang and allows students to slowly gain control over their pull-over muscles rather than throwing themselves into the unknown.

## Tuck/Ball Roll-Out

**Step 1:** Start in hip hang. Grip the sling so that your thumbs face the ceiling. I like to cue “shine a flashlight to the ceiling” or “take your light saber towards the ceiling.”

**Steps 2-3:** Bend the elbows, bringing your chest to your knees. End in a bent arm ball hang (aka tuck hang).



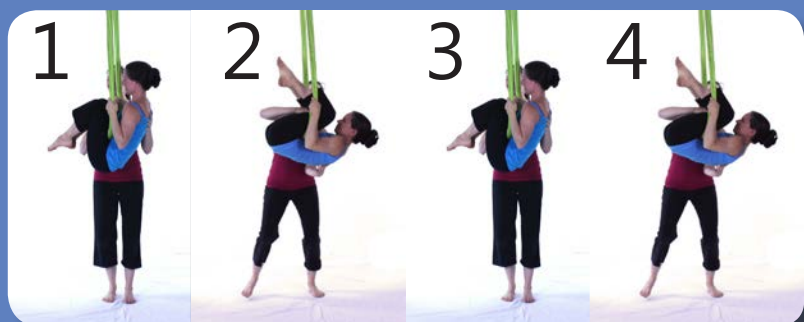
## The Pull-Over

**Steps 1-4:** Use as little jump as you can as you pull up and bring your knees over the sling, tucking them towards your chest. Keep this tuck (don't send your head back!) as you roll back to land in a hip hang.

## Level Up with Tuck or Ball Rolls:

From a hip hang, roll out to the tuck hang. From there, pull back into the hip hang.

*This is a great litmus test to see where students are in terms of their inversion strength. Keep track of how many you can do and see if you can do more with time as you get stronger.*



# Acknowledgments

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I want to start by thanking anyone who has ever been my student. The more you have struggled, the more you made me up my game! I became a better teacher every time I had to find a new way to word something or find an easier pathway for you. Every foundational move has been created because some move somewhere was too hard and it made me step backwards and break things down. This manual is the result of picking up all those bread crumbs. Keep following them, and you will eventually put the whole thing together!

Artists who have especially impacted this project: Jordan Anderson and Clayton Woodson of Circus Building in Charleston, SC --thank you for always doing fun skill shares with me! Kate Edwards of Spin City Fitness -- thank you for allowing your sling curriculum videos and manuals to be an open book for me to reference. I appreciate your collaborative and supportive spirit! Jenn Bruyer -- I am excited to have you featured in later volumes of this series. You were a joy to work with and I am excited for more collaborations. Thank you for helping me find my resolve in transitional elements, as well as your overall inspiration as a sling artist! Rain Anya -- our work together on rope influenced my fabric journey which in turn, influenced my sling journey. Julianna Hane --- for believing in me and calling me the "queen of sling." While no one else does, I appreciate how you felt it might catch on. :) I also appreciate our work together with aerial hoop. It highly influenced my vocabulary on sling. Melissa Roberts -- for sharing the Canopy ways of dance trapeze which has influenced my work on sling more than anything else. And don't worry, I haven't forgotten about trapeze. Saving the best for last, those trapeze manuals are on their way. :) Zina DiTonno -- I hope you don't mind my name "body bag" for the more you showed me, which I have no idea what you call! You also taught me the butterfly flip which made it's way into this manual. You are such a creative powerhouse and I love the joy you bring to all you do. God's love shines through you.

A huge thank you to all my editors. If you find any typos, it's their fault. haha! j/k. Likewise, if the book is perfect, which is more likely to be the case, it's all because of them. :)



## About the Author

---

**Rebekah Jean Leach** has been dancing for over three decades now. Dancing led to aerial while Rebekah was studying Mathematics at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. She was discovered through MySpace (I know, times have changed, right?!) by Aerial Experience to perform on numerous shows and tours across the country. She also worked with Daughter of Zion Aerial Dance Theater. Her experiences led her to teaching, which led to the opening of her first studio in Ojai, California in 2008. It was a small studio out of her home; it was a place to grow, learn and explore the new world of aerial (before the rise of YouTube, Instagram, Life as We Know It, etc).

Rebekah's life took twists and turns, including service in the United States Navy from 2010-2018, where she was a Master Training Specialist in the area of Nuclear Physics. Now, Rebekah continues her love of puzzles and brain workouts through the study of aerial theory and documenting the findings of her research. She opened AerialWorks in Castle Rock, CO, in 2016. Funds from previous books helped make this dream a reality and continue to fund the studio. So, thank you for your purchase!

*Rebekah currently resides in Castle Rock, Colorado with husband and two beautiful children. She teaches weekly aerial classes and private lessons at AerialWorks.*