



## Dog-Mom

By **WRW** - May 4, 2022



*Ember Dingo Valentine is an Australian cattle dog, a.k.a. blue heeler, whose human mom had to give her away. Photo credit: Eric Valentine*

When the team of dog hikers received the group email from their boss, Eric replied immediately and clearly.

He wrote back, "I'll take her!" And then followed it up with a text, "Kristen, I'd love to adopt Ember. Tell her mom no need for a test drive. I'll commit."

"I was hoping you'd take her in!" Kristen wrote back.

Ember was a 2-year-old, black-and-white-spotted Australian cattle dog, a breed many folks call blue heelers, a moniker Eric would soon train himself out of using. You see, Ember's breed should be known for more than their tendency to nip at heels, a skill for herding livestock. The breed is a cross between the Smithsfield—an English

herding dog that didn't like Australia's weather so much, a Dalmatian—a hound that can hunt and protect both by tracking and heeling, and a Dingo—Australia's wild dog brought to the continent by Asian seafarers 4,000 years ago (layman's translation: an Akita mixed with wolf).



All this was not why Eric felt a special connection with the dog. Eric didn't even have the first clue about Ember's breed and how, in the 1800s, it saved the Australian beef industry, helping make it a perennial top-three beef exporter in the world. The running joke amongst his fellow dog hikers was that Eric convinced himself Ember had a crush on him. It explained—but, not really—why she'd hike the trails with him when they were alone but not when they were with other dogs. She exhibited this peculiar, obstinate behavior for no other hiker but him (turned out, he simply didn't know she's a lot like most moms—a multitasker breed—and likes to hike while she plays fetch).

Ember was living a happy life with her owners, a couple (let's call them Sam and Judy) who both held good jobs and owned a nice home. But, for whatever reason, they weren't happy with each other and decided to split, live separate lives, and work out a deal for Judy to keep the house. To afford that, Judy needed to upgrade her pay scale and took a lucrative job that required regular travel. She knew that keeping the house meant letting go of Ember.

Eric was outside checking mail the moment Judy and Ember drove up. The car door opened, the black and white dog jumped out excitedly, and Judy, expressionless, went to her trunk to pull out a large basket of leashes and collars and chew toys and more. It was like a Petco box store reduced down to one large bin. It was at that moment it hit Eric how this was not a happy day for every party involved, and he began walking the fine line of showing only the ability to take Ember in.

"Let me show you where she'll be and what she'll have around her," Eric said.

"OK," was all Judy could muster.

Judy explained each item in the big bin they carried up the stairs together. Ember wagged her tail and walked the fine line of—in her mind—showing others the way while waiting for any cue from them to tell her to do something new.

There were no surprises in that box, but Judy explained each item, which ones were used, which ones were new, which ones Ember likes, which ones Ember doesn't. Somewhere between the rundown of the joint-health chewables and the nail clipper, Eric realized he was not being given a tutorial. He was watching a woman's most core nature come into play. Working out in her mind a traumatically unanswerable and tragically unfair question to ask, "How does a mother give up her foal?"

When Judy realized there were no more details or how-tos to tell, she fell silent quickly. Eric didn't know what to say exactly, so he practiced saying nothing at all, put his arms around Judy and just let her cry.



"I feel like I failed her," Judy wept.

"You've done an amazing job," Eric said.

"Take pictures? Maybe when I'm in town, a hike?" Judy asked.

"Of course," Eric replied. "As many or as few as you need."

Judy wiped her tears, saw Ember take notice of Eric's cat, nodded OK, and prepared for the most painful part of it all. Eric nodded in return. Ember heard the front door open and watched it close, catching sight of her mom's right heel as she left out the door. Ember looked up at Eric, whined to tell him what to do, and looked back a time or two at the gap of space where the bottom of the door should be more flush to the floor.

Eric breathed and sighed for a silent moment as he watched Ember let the thought of Judy's location and need circle one more time through, then said to his new pooch two of her favorite words, "Wanna play?!"

And Ember did just that, still to this day.

How does a mother give up her foal? How she gives birth—in pain, and with an unending belief her sacrifice serves what's best.

**Editor's Note:** *Happy Mother's Day. This is a [True Story](#), dedicated to all the mothers out there, especially the ones who couldn't be.*

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