

A photograph of a metal door with a red rectangular patch and a teddy bear lying on the floor in front of it. The door is dark and textured, with several silver bolts visible. The teddy bear is light brown and appears to be lying on a dark, cracked floor. The overall mood is somber and evocative.

YOUR EX STEALS YOUR CHILDREN  
AND TAKES THEM OVERSEAS ...

# HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO TO GET BACK YOUR KIDS?

## LONG WAY HOME

With Australia's rates of child abductions steadily increasing, some parents are resorting to desperate – and at times unlawful – measures to regain custody of their children.

## Business is booming for child recovery agencies in Australia. But with no licence required to operate and controversial methods used to *snatch kids off the street*, is it really a rescue mission or just plain abduction?

Robert Hardy reports

**S**tuart Dempster's heart raced as he spied his seven-year-old daughter in the garden of his ex-wife's Thailand home. It was hot and muggy, and a sheen of nervous sweat stained his T-shirt as he walked towards her, one of her favourite teddy bears in his hands.

Natasha ran towards him. She had grown taller and thinner over the two years and three months since Stuart's ex-wife had taken her from Brisbane to her family's home in Thailand, refusing to return her to Australia. It was May 2015 and, after weeks of negotiation, his former wife was finally letting him spend some time with his daughter.

He held his little girl's hand and tried to keep calm, rehearsing the plan in his mind. "My heart rate was up, but I was just playing with her, trying to act

normal," he recalls. He told his ex-wife they were going to a park and then lunch, promising to return that afternoon. She waved as they boarded a motorised rickshaw to a playground where they kicked a football around for five minutes.

Waiting for them in a hire car was child recovery agent Adam Whittington, whom Dempster had paid \$15,000 to spirit them home to Australia. In the car were toys, lollies, and a passport and suitcase of new clothes for Natasha.

Dempster, 56, sat nervously in the back seat with his daughter, telling jokes. "I was concerned we would get caught or that she would start screaming 'Oh, my mummy,'" he says.

Whittington drove for an hour, over the border into Laos and to the airport in the capital Vientiane, where they flew to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, then on to Sydney. Natasha became upset as they departed. "What's happening?" she asked, crying. "We're going home to Australia," her father said. "We're going back. Just the two of us."

Stealing home a child who has been abducted is a risk for any desperate person. The stakes are even greater when the abductor is the mother or father. Australia is considered to have among the world's highest rates of international child abduction per capita – largely due to the fact that at least one parent in 45 per cent of marriages was born overseas.

There were 114 children stolen abroad by parents from Australia in ▷

Australia is considered to have among the world's highest international abduction rates

**TOGETHER AT LAST**  
Stuart Dempster and his daughter, Natasha, have settled back home in Queensland after a swift escape from Thailand in 2015.



NEWSPIX/GETTY IMAGES

# Investigation

2014–15, up from 79 the previous year, says the Attorney-General's Department (which keeps figures only for the 94 countries under The Hague Convention On The Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction). But less than half of those children have come home.

Dempster never imagined he would have to go to such lengths to bring back his daughter. Natasha was born in 2009, three years after he met his Thai wife. By her fourth birthday, the marriage was splintering. In January 2013, when his wife said she was taking their daughter abroad for eight days, he thought the break might help. But once she was in Thailand, she refused to answer his calls or emails. Dempster contacted the Australian authorities, but there was little they could do – Thailand was not fulfilling the provisions of The Hague Convention.

In desperation, Dempster called Child Abduction Recovery International, which led to him fleeing Thailand with Natasha in May 2015. She's now in Year Three at school in Queensland and doing well, he says. "There were a couple of occasions where she cried [for her mum], but now there are no tears."

Not all stories end so neatly. The hazards were highlighted in April after Adam Whittington, Channel 9's *60 Minutes* crew and Brisbane mother Sally Faulkner were detained in Lebanon when an attempt to snatch her two children from the arms of their grandmother on a busy street went wrong.

Child recovery agencies occupy a murky world of deception, weapons, high-speed car chases and escapes across borders. It's an expensive venture, too – operations can cost up to \$1 million. But recovery agents claim business is booming. An online search reveals dozens of slick websites that spruik extraordinary success rates, using squads of ex-soldiers.

Anyone can call themselves a child recovery specialist. There's no licence or instruction manual. So what gives them the right to determine which parent should have the children? Some agents insist they act only for clients with



**SHADY SHOWDOWN**  
Above: Eliza Szornert and Ashley Crick's fight over their son, Griffin, came to a head when Szornert, accompanied by two burly recovery agents, turned up at a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur to snatch her son (top right).



Family Court Of Australia Chief Justice Diana Bryant considers recovery missions akin to abduction.



custody orders, and that courts are the moral adjudicators in each case. Others admit they instead go by their "gut feeling" of which parent is in the right.

Child recovery specialist Eric Kalmus, of security company ABP World Group, says agents should not put themselves above the law. He was abducted as a boy by his father, and is adamant that it's in the best interests of children to come home. "For the child, it is always better to be taken back," he says. "I lost all trust because the life that I knew was taken out from under my feet overnight."

ABP does about 20 recoveries a year, and California-based Kalmus says that he is contacted at least once a day by a "left-behind" parent. According to Kalmus, Whittington's biggest mistake in Lebanon was letting his agents snatch the children: "They should have stepped in the way of the grandmother while the mother took the children. The mother has the legal right to recover her children, not two Rambo guys in the street."

Parents retain basic legal rights to claim custody of their child in the absence of court orders to the contrary. Kalmus says ABP only recovers children for clients who have court-ordered custody. But in 2013, Italian police arrested four people connected to the company for allegedly conspiring to

kidnap children in contested custody cases. ABP denied the claims.

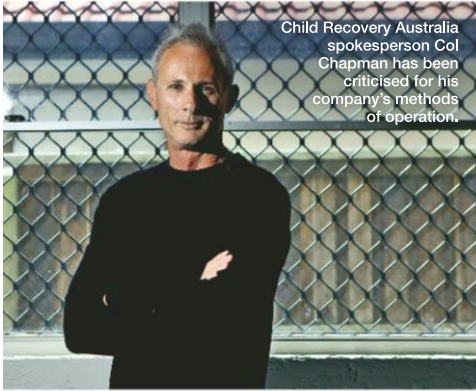
Whittington, a former Australian soldier and Scotland Yard detective, was jailed in Singapore in 2014, reportedly for entering the country illegally and assaulting a 68-year-old woman and 66-year-old man when they tried to stop him taking their two-year-old grandson.

Family Court of Australia Chief Justice Diana Bryant likens such operations to child abduction. "I'm not without compassion for a parent whose child has been wrongfully retained or moved to another country where there is little chance of recovering them. But you would have to be sure there was no other reasonable legal means before you contemplated embarking on this," she says.

**A**shley Crick was eating with his six-year-old son, Griffin, at a restaurant in Malaysia, where he works for a media company, when two men "built like a tank" surrounded their table. "Don't do anything stupid, Ashley. You are being filmed. We are taking your son," one said.

It was December 10, 2015, and Crick was stuck against his table, not reaching for Griffin in case his son got hurt. While he was distracted by the agents from Child Recovery Australia, his ex-partner Eliza Szornert, a former actress on *Neighbours* and *Underbelly*, whisked their boy away. "It's probably the most horrifying experience you can have," Crick, 44, tells *marie claire*.

**Child recovery agencies occupy a murky world of deception, weapons and high-speed car chases**



Child Recovery Australia spokesperson Col Chapman has been criticised for his company's methods of operation.

Szonert had moved with Griffin to Kuala Lumpur to live with Crick in August 2015. He says he asked her to leave because of personal issues – a claim she denies. After snatching Griffin, Szonert went on the run with her son for more than three weeks, before all parties returned to Australia to resolve the custody dispute. Griffin is now living with his father in Kuala Lumpur; Szonert remains in Australia.

Crick is damning of the actions by Child Recovery Australia and disagrees with the term “child recovery”. “The clear implication, by calling it a recovery, was that I had done something wrong and abducted my child in the first place,” he says. “But these guys kidnapped my son from my legal care, without checking [the] facts.

“For every case they may get right, they will get many more horribly wrong. What gives anybody a right to be the judge and jury, and do that to a child or parent? These people are thugs for hire and this industry should be shut down.”

Col Chapman, a spokesperson for Child Recovery Australia, defends his company's action, claiming he only acts for clients backed by court orders. Chapman believes he's recovered more than 100 kids, and says demand has doubled in the past decade, as he works on about a dozen international cases a year. “The majority of our work has come from cross-cultural relationships that have broken down. My phone used to ring 10 times a week, now it's 30.”

His fees vary depending on the child's location, from about \$15,000 in the Oceania region to \$100,000 in Europe and South America. He says he pockets about \$1000 in each case – the lion's share covers costs such as transport and surveillance. “There is no greater gift than giving a parent back the child they thought they had lost,” he says. Still, some of his methods have attracted criticism.

In Trinidad in 2008, Chapman slipped a sedative into a soft drink can that was given to a nine-year-old girl to keep her relaxed during a recovery operation. He says it was a mild prescription drug and that he had her father's permission. “Some people argue about our tactics, but imagine life without your kids. How far would you go?” he asks.

Not all recoveries from Lebanon fail so spectacularly, as in Faulkner's case. In December 2008, a 26-year-old Norwegian woman named Sylvia\* was studying in Australia when she fell in love with an Australian-Lebanese man in Sydney. Their daughter, Lucinda\*, was born a year later. Sylvia says when her relationship broke down over religious differences, it was agreed she would move back to Norway with Lucinda.

A month before their scheduled departure, Lucinda's father stole their daughter abroad to Lebanon. Sylvia hired ABP, who tracked them to a village in the country's north, then concocted a plan to recover Lucinda. Sylvia told her former partner that she wanted them to live together in Australia.

In February 2013, she met him and Lucinda at a cafe in Lebanon to discuss arrangements. Sylvia took Lucinda to

the toilet, leaving behind a handbag and luggage stuffed with clothes to fool her former partner. While he waited, she carried her daughter from the toilet through a conference room, into a stairwell and out an emergency exit. “I said, ‘We're going to Norway on a surprise trip’, and she smiled,” explains Sylvia. “My adrenaline went from zero to 100 in one minute. I didn't stop to think. I just grabbed her and went.”

Waiting with a car were child recovery agents. Sylvia and Lucinda were driven to a safe house nearby and the next morning they boarded a boat to Cyprus. “On the boat, there was still a chance that someone could come and get us, so I was looking off to the sides and behind us all the time,” says Sylvia. “But when we got close to Cyprus, I didn't look back. It was like everything in my life had been on hold for eight months and suddenly my life was back. I remember holding my daughter and saying, ‘We are going home.’”

Lucinda has had no contact with her father since fleeing Lebanon. Twice a year, Sylvia sends him photos and news of their daughter. “I believe he loves her and could have been a great father if he hadn't done what he did,” she says.

She refers to herself as one of the “lucky ones”. The sad case of Faulkner – who reportedly had to sign away her custody rights in Lebanon as a condition of her prison release – illustrates the risks of child recovery operations, says Sylvia. “There are so many people who end up losing their kids. I remember thinking, ‘I have one shot. If we fail, that is it.’”

Patricia Nunez is taking a different tack. Her sons, nine-year-old ▷

#### THE AFTERMATH

Since Sally Faulkner arrived home with the *60 Minutes* crew by her side but without her children, Lahela and Noah, she's had no contact with the kids she left behind.



# Investigation

Peyton, and Nathaniel, six, left for a trip to Disneyland with their Taiwanese-Australian father, Darwin Lee, in January 2014. She hoped the holiday would help keep the peace with Lee during their custody battle. When they didn't come home, she called the police and, later, hired a private investigator. More than a year passed before her ex-husband and children were tracked down in Taiwan.

Nunez, 46, has been trying to regain custody of her sons through Taiwanese courts ever since. In December 2015, a judge made a temporary order granting her regular two-hourly visits with her children in a counsellor's office in Taiwan, pending a full custody ruling.

Nunez now travels from Sydney to Taiwan each month to see them. During the visits, her boys, now aged 11 and eight, mostly just do their homework. "They don't talk to me. They see me as the one who couldn't get along with their dad and that this is all my fault," she says. Having your children taken away is a form of domestic abuse, she says. "It is like you are being punched in the face every day. It strips you down and is designed to break you."

But she has never considered hiring recovery agents because of the risks involved. "If something goes wrong, you have a high chance of never seeing your children again," she says. She maintains hope that the judge will award her custody in Australia. "I stay strong and positive because I need to be there for my children, but I can see how some give up," she says. "If I was to win, I still have years ahead of me where I have to fix something that is broken because their trust is gone."

**U**nder the rules of The Hague Convention, Australian parents can seek recovery of children who are wrongfully removed to or retained in another convention country. Courts in the other convention country are supposed to

**114**  
Australian children were abducted by their parents in 2014–2015

**94**  
countries have signed a convention to return kids to their homeland



While child recovery websites (left) are just a quick Google search away, Patricia Nunez (above) is choosing to fight for custody through the Taiwanese courts.

criminal charges. "Heavy penalties might make people feel better. But, say, in the recent Lebanon case, the father would think twice before bringing the children back to Australia if

he knew he might spend time in jail." Instead, she supports other methods to prevent abduction, such as putting a child's name on the Family Law Watchlist to stop them from leaving the country. She suggests the introduction of travel consent documents where the written consent of both parents is required before a child might leave the country.

Dr Wollner advises left-behind parents to pursue legal channels rather than engage a child recovery agency. "Parental abduction in the long term can cause alienation from both parents and create issues associated with loss of trust, ability to form relationships, depression and anxiety," she says. "You can understand parents taking such measures because they're desperate, but they have to remain child-focused. Recovery agencies take the high moral ground, but unless the claims of both parents are tested before a court of law, it is difficult to say who is right and who is at fault."

But Dempster has no regrets about hiring Adam Whittington. "A lot of people who are pontificating on this situation in Lebanon need to ask themselves a simple question: what would you do if one day you come home and your son or your daughter is not there?" Dempster's ex-wife didn't pursue him as he fled the country with his daughter. He says he has emailed since returning to Australia, but received no reply. Today, Natasha suffers from feelings of parental alienation, he says. "To an extent she is bottling things up, and I am getting advice on how to deal with it."

"She is too young to understand," he explains. "But at some point, I will tell my daughter everything." □

return an abducted child urgently, but may refuse if the child has been living in the other country for more than 12 months or when they determine that return would expose the child to grave risk of physical or psychological harm.

The Attorney-General's Department assists with abductions, but is unable to when the child is taken to a non-Hague Convention country, such as India, Pakistan, China and Indonesia. Meanwhile, Australia has a separate agreement with Lebanon, and Thailand is part of the convention, but does not always comply with its provisions.

Nunez argues that Australia should criminalise child abductions to assist parents. Outside of Family Court custody orders, there is no real offence against a parent abducting their child. A 2011 Senate inquiry recommended the government consider stronger measures, including criminalising such behaviour.

Dr Ann Wollner, a legal service manager at International Social Service Australia, an organisation that assists parents over international abductions, says there are provisions in the Family Law Act that make parental removal a crime. However, she believes extending criminal penalties against abductions is likely to be ineffective and self-defeating. Courts would be less inclined to send a child home if their parent faced jail upon return, and parents would not return voluntarily if they were going to face