

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

Stuart 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.

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#### TOGETHER AT LAST

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



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