

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

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.

Ashley 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 Szonert, 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*.

SHADY SHOWDOWN

Above: Eliza Szonert and Ashley Crick's fight over their son, Griffin, came to a head when Szonert, 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.

