

Below is a **feature screenplay beat sheet** for *The Deceit and Desire*, a historical family-separation drama framed by modern inquiry testimony, with Arthur Delaney as the grieving father and Emma Stirling as the self-righteous antagonist whose “charity” becomes a vehicle for abduction, class prejudice, and religious bigotry.

Beat Sheet: *The Deceit and Desire*

Beat	Approx. Page	Story Function	What Happens
Opening Image	1–2	Establish testimony and historical reckoning	In 2020, Patricia Dishon gives evidence to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry. Her family’s discovery of old Court of Session documents becomes the gateway into the Delaney family story.
Set-Up	2–10	Introduce Arthur’s family and Emma’s institution	In 1882 Edinburgh, Arthur Delaney lives in poverty with his pregnant wife Mary and their children James, Annie, and Robina. Their Catholic/Protestant family tensions are established. In parallel, Emma Stirling runs children’s homes and prepares to send poor children to Canada under the banner of charity and moral salvation.
Theme Stated	3–4	Religion, class, and power can corrupt compassion	Arthur says religion can bring out the worst in people. That idea runs through the script: faith can comfort the vulnerable, but it can also be used to justify control, cruelty, and theft.
Catalyst	18–24	Mary and the baby die	Mary gives birth to a baby girl who dies shortly after delivery. The following morning, Arthur discovers Mary has also died. He is left widowed with three young children and no practical support.
Debate	24–38	Can Arthur cope alone?	Arthur tries to manage work, grief, childcare, poverty, and neighbours’ help. He loses his job, quarrels with Maggie after Robina wanders off, and is approached by Miss Guthrie, who offers the Children’s Aid and Refuge Society as temporary help.
Break into Two	38–40	Arthur signs the children over temporarily	Arthur takes James, Annie, and Robina to Mackenzie Place. Emma Stirling promises care, food, clothes, education, and the possibility of return once Arthur is back on his feet. Arthur signs the agreement believing the arrangement is temporary.
B Story	42–52	Arthur falls, then begins to rebuild	Separated from his children, Arthur collapses into drink and destitution. Cecilia finds him in St Patrick’s Church and helps him regain hope. He remarries, returns to faith and community, and becomes strong enough to seek the children’s return.
Fun and Games	30–50	The false promise of charitable rescue	Emma transports children to Nova Scotia, establishes Hillfoot Farm, and prepares to distribute them as labourers and domestic servants. His son James is reunited briefly with Annie and Robina, but the children are already being treated as placements rather than family.
Midpoint	46–52	Arthur discovers the children have been taken to Canada	Arthur returns to Mackenzie Place with repayment money, ready to reclaim his children, only to learn they have been sent to Nova Scotia. His private grief becomes a legal battle. Father Hannan directs him to Ross Stewart, who confirms Arthur’s parental rights have been violated.
Bad Guys Close In	53–62	Emma refuses to return the children	Miss Guthrie alerts Emma by telegram. Emma returns to Scotland but resists the board, claiming Arthur is an unfit “papist” father. She

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			admits the girls are in Scotland but refuses to reveal where, while James remains abroad.
All Is Lost	61–63	Emma evades accountability	Arthur confronts Emma on the Royal Mile, accusing her of stealing his children. In court, it emerges that Emma returned to Edinburgh with the children but absconded again, eventually taking them back to Nova Scotia. The system recognises the wrong but cannot easily undo it.
Dark Night of the Soul	63–79	The search becomes desperate and global	Arthur and his allies pursue every lead. The legal process drags on. The children are dispersed, and Arthur’s hope narrows from legal victory to simply finding them alive.
Break into Three	79–81	Arthur tracks the children, but too late	Arthur reaches a family who had taken in the girls, only to learn they believed Annie and Robina were orphans and that a supposed uncle collected them two weeks earlier. Arthur realises Emma or her agent has again moved the children beyond reach.
Finale — Phase 1: Hillfoot Farm search	80–81	Arthur reaches the source	Arthur and Grant Cunningham travel to Hillfoot Farm in Nova Scotia and break into the property, searching for the children. They find the farm empty. Arthur’s rage and despair erupt: “What kindae God are ye?!”
Finale — Phase 2: Arthur accepts irreversible loss	81	The father is defeated by distance, law, and deception	Arthur returns to Waverley Station, where Cecilia waits. Grant apologises that more could not be done. Arthur admits the unbearable truth: he will never see the children again.
Resolution	82–84	The inquiry reveals the children’s later lives	Back in 2020, Patricia explains what became of Annie, Robina, and James. James eventually built a family in America and died in 1958. Crucially, he named a daughter Annie Robina and passed down the name Arthur, suggesting he never forgot his sisters or father.
Final Image	84–85	Memory restores dignity	Patricia leaves the inquiry hearing, hearing echoes of Arthur, Mary, Cecilia, and the lost children. She whispers, “Rest in peace Arthur,” giving him the recognition and compassion denied to him in life.

One-sentence structural summary

The Deceit and Desire follows Arthur Delaney, a widowed Edinburgh father whose desperate decision to place his children in temporary charitable care becomes a nightmare when Emma Stirling removes them to Canada, forcing him into a legal and emotional battle against class prejudice, religious bigotry, and institutional power.

Logline

When a grieving widower entrusts his three children to a Victorian charity until he can recover from poverty and loss, he discovers they have been shipped to Canada without his consent and begins a desperate fight to reclaim them from the woman who believes she has saved them.

Core character arcs

Arthur Delaney begins as a loving but overwhelmed father. Mary’s death breaks him, poverty defeats him, and shame drives him into drink. Cecilia and the church help him rebuild, but his restored strength comes too late to undo Emma’s deception. His tragedy is that he becomes worthy of reclaiming his children after they have already been stolen.

Emma Stirling begins as a respected charitable reformer but is revealed as authoritarian, anti-Catholic, and convinced of her own righteousness. Her “desire” to rescue poor children masks the “deceit” of removing them from family, faith, and country.

Mary Delaney is the emotional heart of Arthur’s lost domestic world. Her death creates the wound that exposes the family to institutional interference.

Cecilia becomes Arthur’s second chance at stability. She does not replace Mary; she helps Arthur stand again and pursue justice.

Father Hannan and **Ross Stewart** represent community and law working in Arthur’s favour, though neither can overcome the practical damage already done.

James, Annie, and Robina move from loved children to institutional “cases” and then to scattered lives. Their later names and memories preserve the emotional victory the law could not deliver.

Overall tone

The script plays as a **historical social-justice drama** with strong emotional tragedy. Its power lies in the contrast between intimate family grief and cold institutional certainty: Arthur’s love is messy, poor, flawed, and real; Emma’s charity is orderly, wealthy, righteous — and devastating.