BEAT

The physical action of story creates an emotional reaction within your character, and these are the emotional beats. The moments of emotional reaction that then show us what motivates the next action within the character. When you connect all of the emotional beats within the story, you can clearly outline the character arc (loveless woman finds love; materialistic jerk becomes kind-hearted, etc.).

Within the scene, the term “beat” is simply used (actually, mostly within an acting context) to indicate wherever there is a significant emotional reversal or reveal. A turning point within the scene. You think things are one way, but then something happens to spin the scene in a new direction.

For example, if there is a scene where the hero fights the antagonist and we think he’s winning and is about to kill that antagonist – such as in Star Wars - but then suddenly the antagonist reveals that he’s really the father and not just an evil stranger, that moment would be considered the emotional turning point of the scene and could be referred to as the “beat” of that scene.