

The Joys and Perils of Cat Sitting

PART III, THE AGGRESSIVE CAT

by Janice Leaman

This month's topic focuses on the AGGRESSIVE CAT. (We have already covered the TIMID CAT in Part I, the HAPPY CAT in Part II and Part III will conclude our series). There are three different types of cats that I would call aggressive. The passive aggressive (somewhat aggressive), the stalker (moderately aggressive), and the outright attack cat (watch out).

I lived with a passive aggressive cat, Abby the classic tabby, for fifteen years. She was one of the most beautiful felines I have ever seen, as often seems to be the case with cats lacking in some of the social graces. Abby grew up a rough and tumble kitten with a mind of her own, and a bit of a temper when all was not to her liking. We called her our little Jekyll and Hyde cat. She could be as sweet as sugar one minute, and want nothing to do with us the next. She was an expert napper and derived great joy from harassing our other two cats. She was a terror at the Vet's office and had been known to scratch and bite with little provocation. Although she loved us and we knew how to handle her, I just wouldn't trust her with a stranger. She adored my husband, but even he had to be careful when she was in a bad mood. Thank goodness she mellowed with age and by the time she was in her

teens, she really was a great cat. We loved her dearly, despite her many slight personality flaws.

Abby is a good example of a cat we would leave alone while we are pet sitting. When ever my husband and I went away, my cat sitter had strict instructions not to touch Abby. A cat with the passive aggressive personality may look friendly, may enjoy being talked to, and perhaps may even appreciate some companionship (from across the room) for awhile.

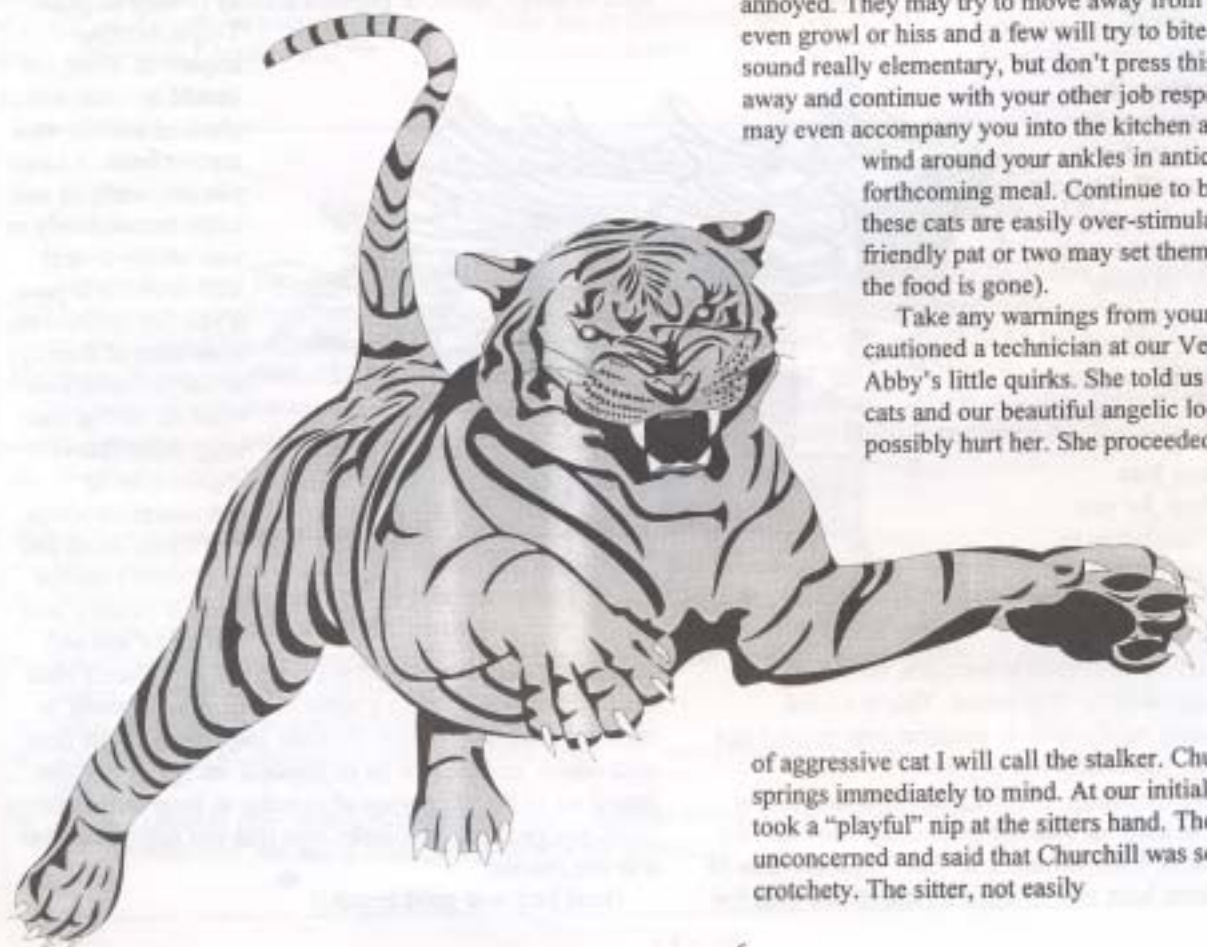
The only problem with this kind of cat is that your client may neglect to tell you of their little idiosyncracies. At your initial interview when the owner is present, the cat may do nothing more than glare at you or perhaps ignore you. But listen for words like "testy", "cranky", "crabby", "grumpy", "ornery", "grouchy", etc. when the owner is describing their cat. Ask where the cat prefers to be petted or rubbed, and ask if the cat has ever been known to scratch or bite. Some cats are fine if you pet them around the head, but watch out if you get anywhere near their tails or tummies.

When pet sitting, my employees are instructed to approach the cat quietly, squat down to cat level and let the cat sniff their hand. As with Abby, and with many cats we care for, when approached, the passive aggressive cat will probably flatten his ears and look annoyed. They may try to move away from your touch. Some may even growl or hiss and a few will try to bite or scratch. It may sound really elementary, but don't press this cat any further. Back away and continue with your other job responsibilities. Some cats may even accompany you into the kitchen and some will even wind around your ankles in anticipation of the forthcoming meal. Continue to be careful, because these cats are easily over-stimulated and even a friendly pat or two may set them off (especially after the food is gone).

Take any warnings from your client seriously. We cautioned a technician at our Vet's office about Abby's little quirks. She told us that she was great with cats and our beautiful angelic looking cat wouldn't possibly hurt her. She proceeded to thrust her hand into Abby's cat carrier and was promptly badly scratched. (And I am proud to say that I refrained from saying "I told you so").

The second type of aggressive cat I will call the stalker. Churchill, the gray terror, springs immediately to mind. At our initial interview, Churchill took a "playful" nip at the sitters hand. The owners were very unconcerned and said that Churchill was sometimes a little crotchety. The sitter, not easily

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daunted, took it in stride and proceeded to pet the other two cats who appreciated the attention. The cats were current on all of their shots (we require at the very least a rabies shot) and she prepared to fulfill her assignment.

On her first day, remembering the unprovoked bite, and also recalling that Churchill was fully clawed, she left Churchill to his nap. On her second day, she was changing the water in the upstairs master bedroom when she heard a growl behind her. Turning around she was startled to find Churchill crouched a few feet away and he was moving slowly toward her, teeth bared. There was no doubt in her mind that his intent was decidedly unfriendly. Thinking quickly, she vaulted to one side putting the bed between them. She grabbed a pillow and held it in front of her like a shield. Churchill stopped his advance and settled down on his haunches to glower at her menacingly.

After about 15 minutes, Churchill feeling that his intimidation duties had been accomplished, leisurely swaggered out of the room allowing my sitter to escape. The next day we both went back and I was armed with a broom and a squirt gun. We wouldn't have used either unless absolutely necessary, but it was a comforting feeling to have them around. I was on "Churchill alert" while she spent some time with the other cats. We were fortunate in that Churchill was in the master bedroom once again (obviously one of his favorite territories) and we closed him in until everything else was completed. Then we flung open the door and beat a hasty retreat. My sitter felt able to continue the job for the rest of the week without me (still armed with broom and squirt gun) and all went well, although Churchill continued to be a "little crotchety". Will we care for Churchill again? Yes, and we have many times, but now we know what to expect and are ready for it.

This brings us to our last category which I will call the attack cat. People have often laughed at me when I mention the words "attack cat", but it can be no laughing matter, especially to a sitter fleeing in fright. The first cat that springs to mind is Shana the "devil cat" (an apt nickname my sitters thought up).

Shana is a gorgeous long-haired tortoiseshell that we have cat sat for, for two or three years now. The first time I personally cared for Shana, I would have classified her as a passive aggressive. She glared at me and gave the occasional hiss, but otherwise behaved herself. The second time I sat for Shana, she developed diarrhea and I took her to the Vet. (And getting her into that cat carrier was no mean feat!).

The third time I sat for Shana several months later, there was no doubt in my mind that she remembered that I was that nasty person who took her someplace where they did unmentionable things to her. How do I know this? As I was unlocking the door she saw me through the glass windows on the side of the door and charged the door. I closed the door just in time to hear a thump so loud and forceful that the door actually rattled! I peered in

through the window to see her snarling and growling at me, and then there was another loud thump as she hit the glass. She was aiming for my face and she wasn't kidding.

I quickly made up my mind that for the cat's sake I needed to assign her to another sitter so that Shana would feel more at ease and less "stressed". Over the years a few sitters have cared for Shana at different times, and it seems that the ones that looked the most like me she had the most objection to.

I have always prided myself on my affinity with felines. It continues to be a personal affront to my dignity to admit that there is a cat out there that hates me with a passion. Ah well, the client goes away very frequently, we go twice a day and we certainly don't have to stay for an extended length of time. The only problem is that Shana's mother is convinced that she is a little angel and is just "misunderstood"! Still, I will continue to tell any new sitter about Shana's uh, *volatile disposition* and advise them to be on the defensive.

There is another factor which can influence a cat's response to a pet sitter, or to anyone for that matter. A cat that we have cared for many times, CZ was normally in that happy cat category. Last summer, CZ was put on medication for anxiety shortly before we started our sitting assignment (he was urinating outside of the litter box). The medication was supposed to have a calming effect and everything was going fine until the sitter's last visit.

For no reason whatsoever, CZ launched himself at the sitter and badly bit her forearm and thigh. His eyes were dilated and he was breathing fast. He literally looked and behaved like a wild animal. In shocked disbelief (not to mention considerable pain), the sitter ran into the next room and shut herself in. Thank goodness she had made it to the kitchen where there was a phone and she called me. I came right over and helped both of us beat a hasty retreat. I recommended that she go to her doctor immediately for a tetanus shot, and we called CZ's vet to get his expertise on the matter. We also left a detailed note explaining everything to the owner, who was due home in a few hours. CZ was in such a state that we doubted he would even recognize his own people, and we didn't want them to be bitten also.

Needless to say, CZ is off his medication, is doing fine, and even had the presence of mind to send conciliatory flowers to his sitter (the flowers came with a nice note and his paw print). This bizarre occurrence has only happened once in several thousand visits but it never hurts to be aware that it can happen. Any animal bite can quickly become infected and a tetanus shot is always necessary.

Thank goodness, aggressive cats are rare (at least the attack cat variety) and although you don't want to be a wimp, take some precautions when dealing with these "special" pussycats. Remember, their people love them, so temper your daily notes with phrases about how interesting, beautiful and unique their kitties are. Perhaps they really are "misunderstood"! 🐾

