

No Substitute

Susan Diane Johnson

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Dedication

To my son, Kirk, with all my love.

Special thanks and lots of love to my husband, Keith;
my parents, Bill and Barbara; and my sister, Pam, for
always supporting my dreams.

Praise for *No Substitute*

No Substitute is a tender, heartwarming story of lost love restored and is filled with the power of forgiveness. I loved it." ~ Sharon Gillenwater, author, *The Callahans of Texas* series

"Suzie Johnson has written a delightful debut romance novel. The book is full of entertaining twists and turns provided by the hero's playful teenage daughter. This story of love lost and rekindled is sure to warm your heart and inspire you to grow in grace and forgiveness." ~ Dina Sleiman, author, *Dance of the Dandelion*

*“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”
Ephesians 4:32*

1

“True or false, Miss Welsh? Did you ever date my father? Were you once in love with him?”

Amy Welsh squirmed in her chair at the front of the high school classroom, shocked by the unexpected question. Shayna Macmillan stared with unwavering blue eyes, and Amy wondered why on earth she’d ever agreed to be the subject of a mock interview.

The rest of Amy’s students stared on in amusement. It was part of a class exercise, preparing her journalism students to do a real-life interview. Shayna asked to pose her questions to Amy rather than one of her fellow students. As Amy sat face-to-face with Shayna, it seemed as far as Shayna and the rest of the students were concerned, this interview was the real thing. The question appeared carefully chosen, deliberate, as if Shayna knew the answer but needed to hear it confirmed.

“He-llo-o, Miss Welsh.” Shayna waved her hand in front of Amy’s face, and a round of snickers drifted through the classroom.

“I—” Amy took a deep breath and glanced at the eager teenagers leaning forward in their desks with interest.

“Come on, Miss Welsh. Spill.”

She wasn't sure which student spoke but it sounded suspiciously like Ashley Morgan, Shayna's best friend. They'd set her up.

“Yeah. Inquiring minds want to know.” This, from one of the boys in the back row, set off a chorus of cheers accompanied by a couple of wolf-whistles.

“All right, people. This interview is over.” Amy ignored their groans and stood, eager to get out of the hot seat.

“But Miss Welsh,” Shayna protested. She jumped to her feet, her honey-blonde curls bouncing to one side. “We haven't finished yet.” Hands on hips, eyes wide, her lips pressed together with determined insolence.

Amy blinked, surprised at the fierce resolve Shayna displayed. “*You* may not have finished. But *I* have. Besides, the bell is about to ring.”

“I'd say this only lends credence to the fact you were once in love with my father.” Shayna walked to her desk and collected her books with a huff.

Just then the bell sounded and the students—with the exception of Shayna—scrambled for the door.

Amy groaned. She should have known Shayna wouldn't let it go.

Since the day Amy took over this class two weeks ago, Shayna Macmillan proved to be most inquisitive. Without a doubt, she'd make a great investigative reporter someday—a young Diane Sawyer in the making. Smart, determined, and much too grown-up for her fourteen years, Shayna took advanced classes and would likely graduate a year or two ahead of the rest of her class.

Quentin must be extremely proud of his daughter.

An imaginary knife twisted in Amy's stomach whenever she thought of Quentin, and it never felt more real than now with his daughter standing before her.

Exactly where did Shayna learn about Amy and Quentin? And what compelled her to drag a confession out of Amy in front of the entire class? The girl definitely had a flair for the dramatic.

"I'm taking the fifth on this one, Shayna," Amy said. "Run along. You, too, Ashley." Shayna's willowy, redheaded friend lingered at the door, a suspicious twitch at the corners of her mouth.

"But Miss Welsh," Shayna said, "I just want to know—"

"Have a nice day, Shayna."

Shayna's eyes were unblinking, her stance determined. Amy ushered her toward the door.

Shayna stumbled toward it, dragging her feet in defiance, huffing in disgust. "Come on, just—"

"Keep it up, and you're looking at detention. Both of you." Amy looked pointedly at both girls before she firmly shut the door and leaned against it. Blessed quiet. The silence rang oddly in her ears.

Once again, as she had after her first day of filling in for Mrs. Baker, the English and journalism teacher who'd taken maternity leave, Amy questioned whether she wanted to be back here in the Washington town of Goose Bay. With her past laid out for her students to see, the questioning grew stronger. How on earth could Shayna have found out?

Certainly not from Quentin. She couldn't imagine him telling anyone about their past relationship. Especially not his daughter.

Not after what he did to me.



"I'm home, Shayna." Quentin dropped his sports bag on the floor by the doorway, eager to hear about his daughter's day at school...especially journalism class. Even though he should be thinking about any number of problems at work, he'd thought of little else since Shayna brought up the name of her new teacher at the dinner table one evening. Today he left work early, and not even an hour of swimming laps at the local pool followed by a steamy session in the sauna could extract thoughts of Shayna's teacher from his overactive mind.

Miss Welsh. Could she possibly be *his* Amy Welsh? Amy Welsh with long silky brown hair and eyes as rich and dark as chocolate? He'd been hopelessly in love when they were teenagers. Could she really be back in Goose Bay after all these years?

No. Quentin shook his head and quickly dismissed the thought. Even if she was, she wasn't *his* Amy Welsh any longer. He walked through the living room, toward the kitchen.

"Shayna?" Silence met him. Puzzled, he furrowed his brow with concern. Why didn't she answer? His daughter always greeted him the minute he came home from work. In fact, he thought, sniffing the air, Shayna loved to cook and usually had dinner started. He didn't smell anything except the little cinnamon ornaments she'd baked last night. They were still spread out on the counter, waiting to be added to the growing pile of his daughter's craft projects.

As happened frequently, guilt pricked him. Playing lady of the house was too big a responsibility

for a fourteen-year-old, even if she did seem to enjoy it. He never asked it of her after Karen died. Rather, his daughter seemed to naturally slip into the role. Perhaps it was her way of dealing with the loss of her mother. And while their neighbor kept her eye out for Shayna, it wasn't the same as having a woman in the house to talk to. Maybe he should hire a housekeeper, someone who would be company for a lonely teenaged girl. Although, with the way things were at work lately, he probably couldn't afford one.

Still wondering at Shayna's whereabouts, Quentin walked into the kitchen. Amidst the clutter on the table, a sheet of notebook paper caught his eye. His spirits lifted slightly and he smiled, touched by his daughter's sense of responsibility in leaving him a note.

Picking it up, he frowned. The scribbled note wasn't addressed to him. Quentin started to toss it aside, but two words caught his eye. *Miss Welsh*. A suspicious flutter teemed to life beneath his ribs. Unable to help himself, knowing he shouldn't, he quickly scanned the note.

You'll never believe this! Miss Welsh assigned all of us newbies to be partners with someone who took the class last year. You'll never guess who my partner is—Bradley Baxter! THE Bradley Baxter! DROOL!

Drool? His daughter was drooling over a boy? And the boy just happened to be Bradley Baxter, the very same boy he'd fired last summer when he'd caught him smoking on the job site and making sexist remarks to his female carpenter. Uh-uh. No way. Quentin clenched his fist, crumpling the note into a misshapen ball. He tossed it back on the table and began to pace the kitchen with heavy, hurried steps.

His daughter paired with that kid? Quentin shook his head, feeling his blood pressure rise. Not as long as Shayna was under the age of sixty-five. Baxter shouldn't even be in the same class as his daughter. Shayna skipped from seventh to ninth grade. But Baxter had to be at least a junior. Way too old for his little girl. Quentin stopped mid-step, glanced at his watch, and set his jaw.

School ended half an hour ago. The teachers should still be there grading papers or something. He and Miss Welsh were about to have a little talk.

Miss Welsh...Amy Welsh. No. *Miss* Welsh. He needed to think of her as Miss Welsh. Even if she turned out to be the Amy he'd known, as his daughter's teacher he needed to keep it professional. High school romances were long past, certainly not something to be rekindled after seventeen years.

Whoa! He must be lonelier than he thought to even be thinking along these lines. Could that be it? Loneliness? Or a matter of unfinished business between Amy and him?

Yes, Quentin assured himself. He didn't have an interest in rekindling anything. He merely wanted to fix the past. Settle things long left unsettled.

Besides, after the way their romance ended, there wasn't much chance of rekindling anything.



Disturbed by her encounter with Shayna, Amy sat in her classroom long after she ordinarily would have gone home. When she came back to Goose Bay, she knew she wouldn't be able to avoid running into Quentin Macmillan—or even one of his children. Of

course, she hadn't known for sure whether he actually had children, but given his sudden marriage to Karen seventeen years ago, he probably did.

But Amy hadn't expected it to be quite so painful, hadn't expected to take just one glance at a student and automatically know. One look in Shayna's dark blue eyes, and Amy had known the girl belonged to Quentin.

Picking up a piece of chalk, Amy began to scribble out tomorrow's assignments. Thoughts of Quentin and his ocean-colored eyes crept into her head, and she made one mistake after the other. She really needed to stop this. This very line of thought kept her emotions whirling into the wee hours each night.

Coming back here should have been easy. Amy hadn't made her decision lightly or without prayer. She prayed continuously when the job offer came and grew to believe God wanted her here in Goose Bay. The middle school in Issaquah where she'd worked for the last several years had trouble with state funding and cut several positions. Amy's job ended up as one of the casualties.

Teaching jobs were scarce this year, even in the nearby Seattle area. Out of work for months, Amy depleted her savings, and she'd been unsure what to do next. The Lord had obviously provided a job opportunity just when she'd needed it most.

Why then, was she overcome with these silly emotions?

Furiously scrubbing the eraser across the blackboard, she tried to dissipate the distracting memories. It didn't work.

Quentin Macmillan.

He filled her thoughts. She wanted to see him. She

didn't want to see him. Even though she hadn't seen him in years, she couldn't seem to forget him.

But I have to forget him. Every time I think of him, I sin.

The stray thought hit her like the tip of an arrow. Sharp, with a deep, barbed twinge. It wasn't the first time she'd thought it. She struggled with this very issue from the moment she first considered accepting the job.

"I'm sorry, Lord," she whispered. "I know he's married. Please forgive me. This is so wrong."

To emphasize the truthfulness of her thoughts, Amy slammed the eraser into the chalk tray and white powder flew everywhere. She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand.

Certainly she could deal with the past—put it behind her and go merrily on her way. Couldn't she?

Of course she could. She certainly hadn't mooned over him for the past seventeen years. OK, maybe she did at first. But once she came back to town and found out he'd married Karen, she put all thoughts of him out of her mind. At least she tried. It didn't happen overnight, but her heart healed eventually. She dated. Jared Parker even wanted to marry her. Amy pushed that thought away. She didn't want to think about Jared right now.

She just needed one glimpse of Quentin. One glimpse to prove he might have been the desire of her heart at age seventeen, but not now. Not at age thirty-four.

One glimpse, Lord, and I'll forget about him forever. One glimpse and I'll be able to get back to business—subbing for Mrs. Baker with the hope of a permanent job next fall.

But would she really?

Deep down Amy knew her thoughts were merely dictates of logic, in contrast with her heart's desire.

But my heart's desire is wrong. It's a sin.

Ashamed as she was, Amy still couldn't help hoping Quentin would walk in the door and instantly regret his broken promises.

I'm sorry, Lord. I trust You even though it doesn't seem like it. I know You've brought me here for a reason. Help deepen my faith and trust in You.

There. She'd prayed about it. She would be stronger now. God led her back to Goose Bay. She would be patient, trust Him, and wait to find out His purpose for her. *He* would strengthen her by wiping all thoughts of Quentin right out of her head and heart.

Could Quentin be her purpose?

Oh, Amy, you are so pathetic.

With a huge sigh, she closed her eyes and again apologized to the Lord. As ashamed as she was to admit it, she wanted nothing more than to spin around and open her eyes to find him standing there—the Quentin of her youth—waiting with open arms to sweep her away like his long ago promise.

How silly could she be? *Lord, please get him out of my thoughts.*

"Excuse me, Miss Welsh?"

Amy froze at the sound of the husky male voice. Did she really just spin around? A sick feeling rumbled in her stomach at the realization. Her arms were crossed around her waist, eyes closed like a fool, facing an unknown male. *Quentin?* Of course not. Thoughts don't conjure up people.

Then why was she so afraid to open her eyes?

Because if Quentin stood there, she'd have more

than momentary embarrassment to deal with; she'd also have to face the pain of the past.

Ever so slowly, Amy opened her eyes. As she did, her heart thudded and her breath caught in her throat.

Maybe thoughts really could conjure up people. Because there, with a storm raging in his eyes, stood her one-time heart's desire.

Amy's throat grew tight as her eyes focused solely on the man before her. Quentin's lips moved as he stepped toward her, but she couldn't hear his words. She'd dreamed of this moment countless times in the years since she'd left Goose Bay.

She'd also dreaded it—once again coming face to face with the boy she'd loved with all her heart. Man, she corrected herself, watching Quentin slowly walk toward her. He was most definitely not the teenager she remembered.

"Quentin." She sucked in a breath and hoped her voice didn't sound as shaky and breathless as it felt. Just saying his name caused her nerves to jitter.

In her dreams, she'd taken his youthful face and added to it. Fullness, maturity, laugh lines--all the things that came with the transition to adulthood. But she'd done it all wrong.

The man standing here was more rugged than the dream version of Quentin, more muscular. A stranger, if not for his eyes and mouth. Though fine lines fanned the corners of his eyes, and his mouth wasn't spread into the easy grin she remembered so well, she would have recognized him anywhere.

"I— uh—" She gaped at him a moment longer, her mind whirling.

His hair was still black as the night, thick, and, though cut short, still tried to work its way into a curl.

His shirt, the color of the Mediterranean, drew attention to his eyes.

The intensity Amy felt as she stared at him hit her like a sucker punch. The steady breath she took was more a ragged wheeze. So much for attempting to regain her composure.

“Is there a problem with Shayna?”

What a stupid question. Why else would he be here? She bit back her disappointment and prayed for forgiveness...again. She would just keep reminding herself that Quentin had a wife and keep asking the Lord to scrub these thoughts from her mind.

“Amy, I— I can’t believe it’s really you. I wondered. Shayna keeps talking about Miss Welsh this and Miss Welsh that.” One corner of his mouth lifted in a half-hearted, distant smile.

So he’d expected her to be here, discussed her with his daughter. This revelation startled her. It really could have been Quentin who’d told Shayna about their past.

Calm down, it doesn’t mean anything. He’s just a dad who came to see his daughter’s teacher.

A married dad.

His face was weathered by years of hard work, sunshine, and laughter. Karen must make him very happy.

An awkward moment passed before Amy found her voice. “Yes, it’s me.” She laughed self-consciously.

“It’s been a long time, Amy.”

The smooth, honeyed tone of his voice made up for the warmth his smile lacked. And though she wanted to avoid it, she found herself looking into his eyes again. Amy tried to see past her painful memories but felt them blurring her vision.

“What are you doing in town? Besides the obvious, I mean.”

“Someone wrote and told me about the temporary position. I always wanted to come back, so I thought I’d give it a try.” She shrugged matter-of-factly and hoped she sounded nonchalant.

“You never married then?”

Blindsided by the question, Amy almost gasped out loud. Surely he didn’t think every relationship she’d ever attempted had been overshadowed by thoughts of him? Or that she woke up late at night haunted by their unresolved past?

Undeniably defensive, she folded her arms across her chest. “So is this a social visit? Or did you come to talk about Shayna?”

Something flashed in his expression and then quickly disappeared.

“Actually, yes, I did come to talk about Shayna.” His tone dropped in timbre. Amy recognized it as anger, and her stomach plummeted.

What could he possibly be angry about? Had Shayna told him about this afternoon? Even if she had, why would *he* be angry?

Amy neither confirmed nor denied Shayna’s questions. More likely he thought Amy brought the whole thing up, which likely meant he wasn’t the one who’d told Shayna about their former relationship.

“Shayna is one of my best students. Bright, eager, full of enthusiasm. Is she having a problem I’m not aware of?”

“She won’t be having a problem once you take care of it.”

Amy stiffened. His reply implied *she* was the one responsible.

“And what exactly is her problem?” She couldn’t help lifting her chin a notch.

“Bradley Baxter.” Quentin practically spat the name out.

“I don’t understand.” Amy frowned. A third-year journalism student, Bradley was one of her best students.

“You have Baxter paired up with my daughter. I don’t want him within fifty feet of her.”

“That’ll be a bit difficult to manage in here.” Amy glanced pointedly around the classroom.

“You know what I mean,” Quentin said dryly. “The less contact Shayna has with him, the better. I don’t want them working together.”

Amy arched a brow and attempted to give him her best ‘teacher’s-in-charge’ look, all the while ignoring the furious flutter of her heart. “Can you give me a good reason why not?”

“I have my reasons.” Quentin folded his arms across his chest, as if to signal the end of the conversation.

But they weren’t finished. Amy could tell by the set of Quentin’s jaw he was holding something back. Something must have happened between Bradley and him in the past. Nothing else could explain his reaction.

“Quentin, without getting personal...” She flushed. Just saying his name out loud tied her tongue in knots. “I realize there’s something you don’t want to tell me and that’s fine. But you have to understand I can’t just go around changing the assignments mid-way through. Each couple is working on their interview questions. They—”

“Couple?” Quentin pulled at his shirt collar as if it

were suddenly too tight. "Understand this! My daughter is *not* going to be any part of a couple with that Baxter kid!"

Startled by his reaction, Amy took a step back. "Of course I don't mean 'couple' the way you just interpreted it," she said hurriedly. "I should have said each 'pair' of students."

"And my say-so alone isn't enough for you to change the assignments?" Now he sounded downright antagonistic.

Even though she didn't like it, Amy had to admit she did understand. He probably knew all the girls threw themselves at Bradley. Quentin was a daddy looking out for his daughter. She'd always wondered what he'd be like as a father. The thought tugged tenderly at her heart, and she hoped Karen cherished this protective "daddy" part of his nature.

A lump formed in her throat. "Think about it for a minute," she said. "I'm sure you know how girls this age are about things like this. You have to realize how humiliating this will be for Shayna."

"She'll get over it," Quentin snapped. Something flickered in his eyes. Uncertainty perhaps?

"Quentin, if I reassign Shayna, I'll need to give her a good explanation considering she's the one who asked to work wi—" She broke off suddenly, realizing what she'd been about to say. Too late, she couldn't recall the words.

"*She what?*" A bright red stain spread across Quentin's face, and the storm she'd noticed earlier in his eyes was back.

"P-Perhaps she doesn't know how you feel about him."

"Oh, she knows all right. He worked for me briefly

last summer, and let's just say it didn't work out. Shayna's heard enough of the details to know how upset I'd be over them working together. So I don't understand why she'd ask to work with him."

"Maybe she has a crush on him?"

Quentin pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath then looked directly at her. The weariness on his face reflected in his voice when he spoke. "How can that be when she knows how I feel about him?"

Quentin rubbed his hand over his chin.

This turn-around tugged even harder at her heart. "There's no logic to the emotions of a girl's heart." The words swelled from deep within and pushed past Amy's lips in a whisper.

Taking one step closer, Amy placed a comforting hand on his upper arm. At least, she meant to be comforting. The instant she made physical contact, she wished she hadn't. Quentin's eyes widened. Hers probably did, too. She couldn't think about the firm muscular strength of his arms, how they'd felt wrapped tightly around her all those years ago.

Amy forced her thoughts back to Shayna, and Quentin's purpose for being here. "Does she date?"

"No, not yet," he whispered.

In that one sentence, Amy heard a loving father torn apart by the inevitability of his daughter someday putting him second.

"She's too young." Quentin glanced away.

Could he be thinking about their high school romance and how, even though they'd never done more than kiss, they'd been constantly inundated with the desire for a more mature relationship?

High up on the classroom wall, the clock ticked. Its