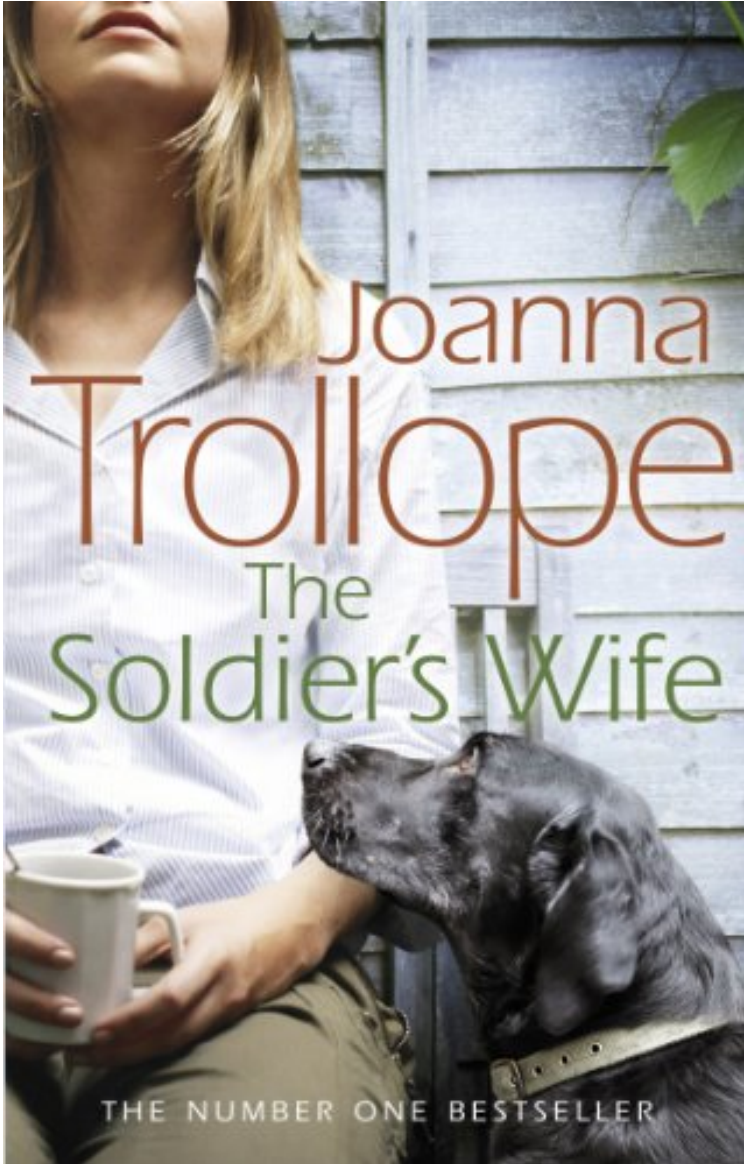


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The Soldier's Wife



Par Joanna Trollope
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe soldiers are coming home after six months in Afghanistan. Surely being reunited with their wives and girlfriends and families will be heaven, after the hell they have been through. When Dan Riley returns to his adored wife, Alexa, and their children, his Army life still comes first. Alexa thought she was prepared to help him, and the whole family, to make the transition to normal life again but no-one had told her how lonely and near impossible the task would be. Does marrying a soldier always have to mean that you are not marrying a man, but a regiment?ExtraitCHAPTER ONEEven before her eyes were open, Isabel could tell that the house was awake. The water was thumping away in the pipes behind the wall in her bedroom, as it had done ever since Maintenancenow contracted out to some civilian firm in Liverpool that

Isabel had heard her mother say was useless had come to stop the shower leaking, and she could also hear the twins twittering away somewhere, in the sort of birdspeak they had developed for private communication. It was annoying, really. It was annoying to be the last awake, and not the first. Isabel had discovered that if she could steal a march on the day even by fifteen minutes she could manage it better, get a grip on herself. At school best, really, not to think about school if she could help it she had devised this method of taking charge of herself deliberately and methodically, as a way of dealing with homesickness. Wake before everyone else, go through the wretched mental photo gallery of home and Mum and the twins and the dog, and the smells museum of the kitchen and Mums sweater drawer and the awkward cupboard where the bed linen lived, whose door would never shut, then gulp, sniff, wipe eyes, sit up, and breathe. Breathe and breathe. Eyes shut, then eyes open. Swallow. Find hairbrush and begin to brush, reminding herself how amazingly lucky she was to have long, thick, straight hair and not the curly or frizzy kind that got you despised for something that you couldnt possibly be blamed for in the first place. Put hairbrush back. One more deep breath. Up. Isabel put her fingers lightly across her eyelids, and opened her eyes slowly behind them. She was not, of course, at school. She was at home, in her own bedroom, at number seven, the Quadrant, Larkford Camp, Wiltshire, which had been home now for nearly two years. Before that home had been a bit in Germany, and a bit in Yorkshire and a bit in London, and before that, when it was just Mum and Isabel on their own, a bit in another part of London in a high-up flat with the top of a tree right outside the windows, which Isabel believed she remembered with a passionate nostalgia. There had also been schools to go with all these places, school after school. Five schools by year six, Mum had said to Isabel, trying to make the case for boarding school. Its too much. Its too much for you. It isnt fair. You make friends and then you move and lose them. Dont you think youd rather have continuity, even if it means sleeping away from home? Isabel didnt know. Even now, technically settled into boarding school, she didnt know. She wanted to feel steadier, she wanted to please, she understood that if Dan got a promotion they might move again but then, if he didnt, if they didnt, why was it necessary for her to be away from home when home wasnt, after all, changing? And then there were the twins. The twins went to a local nursery school, and when they were five would go to the local primary. But the twins Isabel began. Mum looked at her. Isabel could see she understood and hadnt got a real answer. She just said, We cant plan, you see. Not if we want to stay together. As a family. But if you go to boarding school, at least you know I know that one thing, at least, will go on as before. Thats all. In Isabels experience, it was only the small things that went on as before, like the smell of the linen cupboard and the twins refusal to eat anything orange and the way one fingernail on her left hand grew at a very slight angle. The big stuff, like what was going to happen next, to all of them, was always a giant question mark hanging in the air, affecting everything, every mood. And even when the question mark was answered, it was always replaced by another one. Like today. Today was a big day, a day they had been looking forward to for six months, a day that was circled on the kitchen calendar, and for which the twins had made a huge messy paper banner randomly stuck with patches of shiny colored paper and scraps of pink feather from a dressing-up box. Today, Dan was coming home from Afghanistan, with his whole battery. That, Isabel knew, meant about a hundred soldiers. Plus Dan. Plus all the other soldiers, from the other batteries, from the regiment. Planes and planes of them, all coming home together, in transports like flying sardine cans, Dan said, only huge. So Dans coming home took away the question mark of would he be killed or wounded while he was away, which was a huge relief because Dan had always been kind to Isabel, and she appreciated that. But now there was another question mark in place of the would-Dan-be-killed one, and that, although not as awful, was still a deep anxiety. Isabel took her hands away from her face and stared hard at the ceiling above her. People at school talked about what might happen to their soldier fathers a lot. Nobody was supposed to look at or listen to the news at school, but people did, all the same, and then whispered about it. There had been a helicopter crash in Afghanistan last term, and the radio announcer had said, All killed. The relatives have been informed, and Libby Guthrie, whose father was in the Army Flying Corps and who had gone quite white, said, Oh, phew. Relatives have been told. So were OK, then. Theyd all screamed then, and got hysterical with relief, jumping about with their arms round each other, and Isabel had felt an intense, brief, heady sensation of belonging. But she didnt feel that now. She felt very separate and very apprehensive. Dan was coming home and Mum would be thrilled and the twins would be thrilled, and she would be pleased. But what, the new question mark asked, would he be like? In the kitchen, Alexa had the fridge door open. The interior was immaculate, the contents arranged with precision and by category. The kitchen floor Army-issue vinyl printed to resemble outdated Italian floor tiles shone. So did the windows. The walls, which she had painted pale blue herself, although she knew she would have to return them to

magnolia when they left the quarter, were smear-free except for the twins exuberant Welcome Home Daddy poster. There were flowers on the table, the tea towels were ironed, and her hair, still damp from the shower, had possibly never been cleaner. Her friend Mo had been round the evening before on her way to an Army Benevolent Fund early Christmas fair. Twenty quid for tepid curry with the Old and Bold. You're so lucky you can't get a babysitter and come with me and had shouted with laughter at the flawless state of the house. God, were pathetic. What do we think we're doing? Last time Baz got back from exercise he was completely, utterly filthy, and as rank as a polecat, and there I was, spotless in every crevice, not a hair on my body. I ask you! Alexa said, surveying her manicured hands. No varnish, but no torn cuticles, either. I suppose it's relief. And excitement. And she stopped. And what? Army habit. Keeping up appearances. Smart at all times. Mo gave herself a quick glance in Alexa's hall mirror. She pulled down the hem of her embroidered sweater. I should be wearing a dress. To satisfy the Old and Bold. They'll be in Jaeger and regimental brooches, comme toujours. You look great, Alexa said. Better on a horse, though. It disguises my low center of gravity. She leaned forward and gave Alexa a quick kiss. I'll be thinking of you tomorrow. It'll be weird but wonderful. Have a row to clear the air as soon as you can. I'll get him out of his cave. We usually schedule it for day four. Alexa picked a booklet out of a tidy pile on the hall table, and held it out. That's what Welfare recommend, only more circumspectly. What on earth's that? Homecoming, Alexa said. Welfare briefing on how to manage men going away and then men coming back again. Mo didn't try to take it. What a hoot. None of it's a hoot. There was a small pause, and then Mo opened the front door. She blew Alexa a second kiss. But we have to get on with it, don't we? The house looks a peach and so do you. Lucky Major Riley. The door had slammed behind her, and Alexa heard the second slam of her car door, and then the car reversing and roaring away as if she were late to catch a train. Dan said Mo was at her happiest in an emergency, and Alexa had opened her mouth to say that maybe the visible and urgent expenditure of energy was more like a coping mechanism, and had then, for no reason she was very proud of, shut it again. Dan admired people who coped in emergencies. Emergencies were, after all, what he was trained for. And that was just one of the many things she had had to learn. Something else she had learned now lay before her in the fridge. The food for a man sated with nourishment in foil pouches. Simple proteins: steak, chicken, beers, fruit and vegetables, powerfully mature Cheddar. He would probably eat nothing for a day or two although the beers would vanish and no doubt much of the bottle of supermarket whisky she had bought and then he would eat ravenously, whatever straightforward, un-messed-about food she put in front of him, liberally doused in Tabasco sauce. The British Army, she sometimes thought, could absorb as much Tabasco sauce as Avery Island, Louisiana, could produce. The twins played shops with the rinsed-out miniature Tabasco bottles provided in every twenty-four-hour Army ration pack. Dozens of them, perfect replicas of the originals down to the McIlhenny label. Alexa pictured soldierly insides glowing and fire-hardened from years of pepper sauce which reduced everything, in her view, to a blazing similarity. Which was, perhaps, what soldiers wanted: a hot, peppery mush you could shovel in straight from the microwave or a pan of hot water. Certainly, if you shopped in the little supermarket which served the blocks behind the wire where over three thousand single soldiers lived, the freshest item you'd find there would be a foot-long sausage roll. No preparation, no unfamiliarity, no need for cutlery. The fridge let out a bleat of alarm at being left open so long. Alexa gave a little start and banged it shut. What was she doing, standing gazing at marshaled rows of yogurt pots with wet hair and none of the children either dressed or breakfasted? She was doing, she supposed, what her mother had done before every diplomatic party, checking and rechecking, feeling faintly sick and distinctly choked with anxious expectation, and possessed by a simultaneous conviction that she could not cope with what lay ahead and nor could she cope with it not happening. She crossed to the window and held on to the edge of the sink below it. Rough autumn grass she had mown it, she hoped for the last time that year, three weeks ago stretched from the front of the house to the ragged hedge which separated them, and the house they were attached to, from the narrow asphalted road that ran round the Quadrant. There was a big circle of grass in the middle of the Quadrant, and a clump of beech trees through which the unmistakable figure of the Brigadier's wife, small, upright, and purposeful, was making her way with two liver-and-white spaniels at her heels. She was the only officer's wife in the regiment, Alexa thought, not to have Labradors. Black Labradors but she had grown up with spaniels, she said, she understood them. She also had cats. Pansy animals, possibly, she once said to Alexa. But bright. I like a clever creature. Alexa turned her head. Behind her, keeping a watchful eye but not moving until instructed, was Dan's black Labrador, Beetle. He was not a clever creature, but he was biddable, kind, and reliable. He was also the first dog Alexa had ever lived with, having had a wandering diplomatic upbringing that never seemed to allow for more pets than a tank, once, of

tiny turtles, which had proved, after the initial wonder at their size and perfection, to be no more interesting to own than a box of slightly animated stones. Beetle was the first living thing Dan had introduced to Alex before any friend, before his father and he had also proved to be the route that Isabel could take to accepting that Dan was here to stay in their lives, in a role she only really associated with a photograph. Good dog, Alexa said. Beetles tail moved very slightly in polite acknowledgment. He was perhaps the only one in the house whose reaction to Dans return would be entirely uncomplicated. Even the twins, Alexa could not be entirely sure of. Dan had been away once for only a months training, in Canada, when they were not yet two, and when he returned and swooped down to hug them they had been terrified of this unfamiliar giant and fled shrieking behind Alexa. Dan had been devastated. Alexa had found him in their then German garden, on a broken bench, his head in his hands, not able or inclined to be reasonable. It was a week before Tassy, the bolder of the twins, had instructed him to bathe her. And another week before Flora had silently offered him her shoes to put on. And all that time, Dan hardly spoke. He wasnt sulking, he was just somewhere else in the zone, he called it and there was nothing for Alexa to do but wait. This time, of course, she had waited for six months. She had looked after the children, walked Beetle, cooked and cleaned, serviced the car and the lawn mower and the disobliging central-heating boiler; she had mopped up the girlfriends of the junior officers, who had frequently not even met their boyfriends parents, cut the grass, watched countless DVDs in the evenings, joined in endless small female social diversions in the days Hes in the Army, her father had said with forced joviality when she told him she had decided to marry Dan, so youll end up an Army wife, measuring out your days in coffee spoons!; she had tried not to write daily emails to Dan, and certainly not ones that even hinted at the bizarre mixture of feeling both trapped and insecure that haunted her, and was never separated from her telephone. Once a week, there had been a satellite phone call to Dan, in Afghanistan. If there was any crisis or sudden action, all the communications would shut down, and if you missed your turn, you missed it and were rewarded with a particular intensity of anxiety that persisted until the men were permitted to communicate again. Worries about Isabels misery at school, about Floras lazy eye (she wore miniature spectacles with a patch over one lens which gave her a sweetly scholarly air), about the lump on Beetles side had to be choked down even if the phone connection worked, because Dan was mentally in another place, on quite another planet. This tour, he hadnt even taken photographs of them all, nor the drawings the twins had done for him. I cant bear to, he said. He was standing among the precise piles of his kit, in their bedroom. I couldnt look at them last time, and I felt a shit because I couldnt. So, better not to take them. He gave a half laugh. I feel shit about enough, as it is. As well as those calls as vital as they were unsatisfactory Alexa rang her girlfriends on the camp daily. She rang Mo, and Franny and Sara and Prue. She also rang Dans father once a week, out of affection, and her own parents, out of duty. And she rang Jack. She rang Jack almost as often as Jack rang her, which was every day or two. Jack Dearlove had been in Alexas life since she was seven. His father had been a minor diplomat, like hers, and their peripatetic careers had brought their children together, quite by chance, in several postings, the last of which was Bonn, just before both Jack and Alexa went off to university. And at his university Newcastle Jack had made a friend, a close, slightly older friend, whom he had introduced to Alexa in a jazz caf on the Fulham Road which specialized in live music. The friend was called Richard Maybrick, and it was his photograph, taken on a walking holiday in France with his hair ruffled and his teeth gleaming in a wide, untroubled smile, that his daughter, Isabel, kept on her chest of drawers at number seven, the Quadrant, Larkford Camp. Richard Maybrick had died of a brain tumor in the neurological hospital in Queen Square, in London, when Isabel was only a baby. The tumor was diagnosed when he was twenty-six and his wife, Alexa, was pregnant with their first child, and it killed him eighteen months later. Throughout those months, the stocky, comfortable figure of Jack Dearlove was never far away. He was there after the consultations, he was there after every intense and terrifying bout of treatment, he was there when Alexa came out of Richards last hospital room and said, bleakly, Its over. Alexas parents supposed that their daughter would then, after a decent interval, become Mrs. Dearlove. Alexas mother, who had always minded very much about appearances, had even commented upon what an attractive surname it was. Preferable, actually, she said carelessly, to Maybrick. But Alexa, although she saw so much that was lovable in Jacks warmth and dependability and sturdy set of principles, saw nothing either romantic or exciting in him. In any case, Jack himself, devoted as he was to his mate Richards widow and baby, was in love with an Ethiopian model of startling, etiolated beauty, whom he captured, and married, and then lost again, but never ceased to yearn for. He became, as Alexas friend Franny put it, the perfect brother-friend. He had seen Alexa through Richards illness and death. She had seen him through Ekas surrender, and then flight insofar as he would let her. He was designed, Alexa knew, to

pick up the scattered and shattered pieces of humans other than himself. Hed picked her up often enough, after all, quietly materializing just when she needed him, with the extraordinary faithful reliability of the best kind of sister in a Jane Austen novel. In fact, she often thought, he represented a continuity of presence and support in her life that, quite literally, no one else had been able to. Not girlfriends. Not even Dan. Jack had always been there, even when he was physically in London, a sort of cheerful, dependable, affectionate human handrail. He had rung early that morning, before he set off on one of his runs. He was always running, or spinning, or lifting weights, at the gym in Chiswick, near his flat. It was, as he cheerfully admitted, all part of the endless battle he waged with his weight, having inherited his fathers lack of height and his mothers lack of a usefully swift metabolism. I just look at a doughnut, hed say, and it immediately adds itself to my outline. That morning, hed greeted Alexa with Sick as a parrot, are you? Alexa, on her way to the shower, shampoo bottle in hand, had smiled into the telephone. Sicker. Exciting, though. Yes. Are you in a corset and fishnets? Im a mother of three, Alexa said. In a fleece dressing gown that my grandfather-in-law chose for me himself, last Christmas, in Elys department store on Wimbledon High Street. Elys, eh? He likes it there, Alexa said. He doesnt like anything too up-to-date, like coffee shops. On the third floor in Elys, they give you strong tea in a metal pot, and a toasted tea cake. Just the one, to be eaten slowly. I hope youll eat. Breakfast, I mean. Thank you, Nanny, but I couldnt possibly. Itll be coffee with a longing look at the brandy bottle. Jack said, in mock amazement, You have brandy? And weed killer. Wow, Jack said. You live life to the full, down in Wiltshire. We do, Alexa said, the fleece dressing gown and me. And now Im going to wash my hair. Jacks tone changed. Ill be thinking of you. Please do. Ring me tomorrow. Of course. And a high five to the old hero. Alexa dropped her phone into her pocket, and then dropped the dressing gown off her shoulders. She stepped into the showertiles on the wall were missing and the plastic tray at the bottom had a fine, wavering crack across it and found herself humming. Talking to Jack was like finding a forgotten fiver in the fruit bowl. He never failed to make her feel better. Mummy? Alexa turned from the sink. Isabel, in the outgrown nightie patterned with cherries that she insisted on still wearing, was standing in the doorway. Hi, darling. I feel a bit weird. We all do. Isabel drifted towards the table and leaned on it. Beetle sat up in his basket, wagging, and waited for her to notice him. Dyou think Dan does? He probably feels weirder than anyone. Camp Bastion, then up to the airhead, and then twenty-four hours in Cyprus, and then home. Isabel wound herself along the table edge until she was opposite Beetles basket. His tail was a blur of wagging. She knelt beside him and put her arms round his neck. Alexa said, Try not to let him lick you. I like it. What happens in Cyprus? Its called decompression. They get a shave and a shower and a comedy show and something like a barbecue Isabel closed her eyes so that Beetle could make a thorough job of washing her face. Do they get drunk? I dont know, darling. I think theyre only allowed five cans each. And then be sick? Izzy, might I persuade you to have some breakfast? Isabel unlocked her arms and got to her feet. Have the twins had breakfast? Just yogurt so far. At school, Isabel said, Libby Guthries little sister, whos only five, said to me, Is your daddy dead yet? and I said yes. I said hed been dead for ages and then Libby whispered to her sister why and Bella didnt get it and said, Did someone shoot him or blow him up? Alexa came across the kitchen and put her hands on Isabels shoulders. Then she pushed her gently before her until they were standing in front of the fridge. Now. Yogurt, banana, cereal. Or cereal and an apple. Dan is coming home today and he is all in one piece and theres not a scratch on him. We are not going to talk about dying. Isabel said nothing. Alexa reached into the fridge and put a pot of strawberry-flavored yogurt in her hand. Eat, she said. Im going to get the twins. Dan had said, please dont come to Brize Norton. Just wait at home. Itll be heaving at Brize and I dont want to see you all again for the first time in public. Alexa had thought of saying, I think Ive done enough waiting, and then she thought, if Ive waited six months, why cant I wait a few more hours, if hes asked me to? And he was right, anyway; it was so much better to see him come home, privately, than to be part of the massed, emotional, tearful chaos of men and kit and babies and children and women and the wonderful, awful exhilaration of reunion. Wasnt it? She had, of course, planned to go to the air base. She had washed the car, and hoovered crisp crumbs out of the child seats, and cleaned the dashboard with some patent spray cleaner that had left the interior smelling like a cheap beauty parlor. But two nights ago, ringing from Cyprussafe in Cyprus! Safely out of Afghanistan! Dan had said, please dont come to Brize. Be there for me at home, where I can picture you. Ill whistle for Beetle. Let Beetle out when you hear me whistle. Fourish, I should think. Maybe earlier. She wasnt sure how she would have got through the day, if it hadnt been for Franny. Franny just appeared, after breakfast, and looked at the girls and said, Round to mine, babies, to the twins, and I need you, to Isabel, and then she said to Alexa, Ill bring them back about three thirty. How do I ever repay you? You have my horrible boys when Andy flies into a mountain.

He wont He might. Hes another being in that chopper. Alexa looked at Isabel. She had put on small denim shorts over purple tights and the dumpy sheepskin boots that were an off-duty uniform for her school. OK, Iz? Isabel nodded. She bent her head so that her inappropriately shining eyes were not evident. Frannys older boy, Rupert, gave Isabel the distinct feeling that he had somehow noticed her. And he was almost fifteen. Shell be fine, Franny said. Itll give me a day of girl power, having your three. She looked down at the twins, who were whispering away together in their particular language. These two fascinate my boys. Even if theyd rather die than say so. When they had gone, Alexa toured the house for the twentieth time, straightening and adjusting, wrenching the dripping showerhead to its farthest Off position, polishing the draining board with kitchen paper. In the hall, she paused, and took the homecoming leaflet from the Welfare office off the table, and opened it. Why learn about homecoming and reunion? it began brightly. Everyone is affected, thats whyservice members, spouses, and children all feel the stress, as well as friends and relatives. After all, everyone changes. Its only natural that those who have been away, as well as the spouses and children, family and friends, will have changed with time. They wont, any of them, be exactly as you remembered. She put the leaflet down, and looked at herself in the mirror Mo had glanced in the night before. Was she different? Did she look different? A bit thinner, maybe, but the same height, obviously, and hair more or less the same length, and even if her jeans were newish, they were a familiar kind of jeans, and her hoop earrings had been given to her by Dan, soon after they methed said that he thought big earrings went with long hair. She moved her head slightly. Her clean hair swished across her shoulders. Still long, if not quite as long as it had been when she wentso reluctantly!to a party given by a work colleague at the school where they both taught, and there was this tall young man gazing at her from the other side of the room until shed had enough to drink to go up to him and say, in a slightly pantomime voice that she was ashamed, in retrospect, of using, Can I help you in any way, sir? Yes, hed said. You can leave this party with me, right now, before anyone else nabs you. And she had. Theyd gone to a pub, and then to a Chinese place to eat, and then for a walk in a park she didnt know because it wasnt in her part of London, and hed kissed her, suddenly, in the middle of a public path, right under a streetlamp, and here she was, eight years and two babies and five house moves later, waiting for him to come back with all the sick excitement she had felt in that second, in the nighttime park, before he kissed her, and when she had known with complete avidity that he would. Beetle shot suddenly past her out of the kitchen, and stood, quivering and taut, by the front door. Nonsense, Alexa said. Nonsense. He wont be back for hours yet. Beetle took no notice. He focused on the door as if he could see through it, every particle of him poised and straining. Ill show you, Alexa said. Ill open the door and show you. And when it turns out to be someone else, youll feel pretty silly. She leaned across Beetle and unlatched the door. Beetle, unable to bear waiting for even another fraction of a second, shoved the door wider with his shoulder and bolted out towards the road. Alexa looked up, across her badly mown lawn, over the ragged hedge, towards the beech clump. Coming across the central grass of the Quadrant, in desert combats and burdened with his grip and his Bergen rucksack, wasDan.Revue de presse"Written with all Trollope's customary skill and panache, this is an absorbing look at the modern military wife who no longer automatically follows the drum" (Daily Mail)"Nobody understands the snags and frustrations of family life better than Joanna Trollope. She also captures the dangerous pressure points in relationships, the steady build-up of tension, the exact moment when the family fur might really start to fly" (Sunday Express)"Trollope is on top form, hitting the zeitgeist with this perceptive and compassionate inside story of an army marriage" (Woman Home)"The Soldier's Wife is a cracking read and has clearly been thoroughly researched. All the little details which animate a novel ring true... compassionate, humourous and topical" (Spectator)"Trollope is always immensely readable, managing to depict characters' inner turmoil with deft, artful simplicity. Here, she brings her emotionally acute eye to bear on army life" (Henry Sutton Daily Mirror)