On the busiest shopping day of the year, some idealistic college students believe they're about to carry out an elaborate media stunt at the largest mall in America. They think the jamming devices in their backpacks will disrupt stores computer systems, causing delays and chaos. What they don't realize is that instead of jamming devices, their backpacks are stuffed with explosives, ready to be detonated by remote control and turning them into suicide bombers. Caught up in a political nightmare, battling a new interim director and still mourning the death of her boss A. D. Cunningham, FBI profiler Maggie ODell must put her own troubles aside and fly to Minnesota to help figure out what's behind this terrorist attack—a massacre that is all the more frightening because no group has claimed responsibility. The search becomes personal when a tip reveals that one of the college students involved is Patrick, Maggie's brother. Afraid and on the run, Patrick must decide if he can finally trust Maggie enough to help her unravel this horrifying nightmare. Sifting through the debris for answers, Maggie is joined by Nick Morrelli, who has recently taken a job with a national security company that oversees security for the mall. Although Maggie and Nick have investigated several cases together in the past, they've never investigated a relationship with each other. Nick would like to change that. When an informant confides in Maggie that there are other attacks on the secret agenda, she knows that she's running out of time. In less than twenty-four hours she needs to figure out exactly when and where the second attack will take place, who to look for and how to keep her brother from becoming one of the casualties.

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My Personal Review:
Ruckus. Mayhem. Panic. Pandemonium. These are just a few words to describe the busiest retail day of the year, the day after Thanksgiving known as Black Friday. As Alex Kava's latest book opens, three students
are looking to crank the calamity dial up to 11. Upon entering the Mall of America, the country's largest mall, they prepare a device in their backpacks to emit a wireless signal that will disrupt some computer systems. Other than a few major retailers, no one is supposed to be hurt by the prank. Unfortunately, the contents of the backpacks are not as advertised, and a violent explosion leaves shoppers killed and maimed. This massacre drags FBI profiler Maggie O'Dell away from her own post-Thanksgiving celebration in Virginia --- a fete that includes newfound love interest Benjamin Platt --- to Minnesota to participate in the investigation.

But O'Dell may not be ready for the task at hand. She currently has a lot on her plate, and unfortunately none of it is leftover turkey. Still reeling from the death of her former boss, A. D. Cunningham, O'Dell must deal with her new boss, Assistant Director Ray Kunze, who is trying to peg her for Cunningham's death. Kunze is more than ready to throw O'Dell under the bus as a scapegoat; he sees her impulsive, difficult nature as a proverbial thorn in his organization's side. Despite their shared antagonism, the two are forced to work together to get to the bottom of who exactly bombed the Mall of America and why.

While O'Dell and Kunze are transported to the mall, Homeland Security Assistant Deputy Director Nick Morrelli is on a parallel course to the site as well. Morrelli, a representative of United Allied Security (which has the mall as a client), and O'Dell are not strangers, having worked together in the past. Furthermore, Morrelli has sought a more intimate relationship, an overture that O'Dell has declined. Morrelli, however, is tenacious, and their mutual investigation gives him further opportunity to press his case. But there is work to be done, and one of the most frightening aspects of the bombing is that no one has claimed responsibility for the terrorist act.

For O'Dell, the investigation almost immediately strikes too close to home. It appears to the investigators that O'Dell's brother, Patrick, who was at the mall when the bombing occurred, was with the students carrying the backpacks and possibly may have been involved. Patrick knows only that some of his acquaintances had planned a prank. And he may be able to provide the only lead as to the identity of an enigmatic, capable and extremely dangerous mastermind known as the Project Manager. When O'Dell and the other investigators learn that there are other attacks scheduled --- the next to occur in less than 24 hours --- it becomes imperative that she find her brother, not only to ascertain what he knows but also to keep him from becoming one of the next casualties.

Kava uses two techniques --- short chapters and frequent scene shifts --- to keep her well-crafted plot racing along against a clock that ticks louder with each page. O'Dell is a real and believable protagonist, and, unfortunately, one can foresee that if there is another successful terrorist attack on United States soil, it will probably unfold in the way that Kava describes and for the same reason. Read BLACK FRIDAY, and be both entertained and forewarned in equal measure. Although the subject matter
may come off as ominous, Kava's writing balances that feeling of dread with its quiet, understated genius. Think of her as a personal driver who is set to take you on the ride of your life. Like the best of drivers, she knows when to speed up, when to slow down, and when to shift as she propels her readers along a straightforward plot line loaded with scenery that keeps one on edge from journey's beginning to end.

Clearly, I am jazzed by Kava's writing. And when you finish reading BLACK FRIDAY, you will be as well.

--- Reviewed by Joe Hartlaub

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