Safe Haven

PG-13

115 Minutes

Rating: **** out of *****

On a dark, rain-swept night, a young woman named Katie flees from her suburban home and into the arms of a generous neighbor. A few hours later, Katie is boarding a bus headed out of town while a police detective scurries to find her before she can make good her escape. He fails, and soon Katie is headed south, on her way to what she hopes will be a new life. But the past is never far behind and secrets have a way of coming out. Is there a safe haven anywhere in the world for Katie?

Adapted from a novel by bestselling writer Nicholas Sparks, SAFE HAVEN is a story of trust, redemption, and of course, love. The script, which is for the most part well-crafted and deserved credit for avoiding a number of the clichés that often taint romantic dramas, does a good job of establishing a credible cast of characters, especially Katie. Julianne Hough plays the role of the runaway woman with sincerity and passion, and her performance keeps the story grounded. Josh Duhamel is also excellent as Josh, a single father with two small children who is struggling to keep his life together in the wake of his beloved wife’s death. Josh is clearly attracted to Katie from their first meeting, but Katie is reluctant to return his attentions. There is a good reason for her initial reticence, though like Josh the viewer remains in the dark early on. The truth is only slowly revealed, much of it in flashbacks from Katie’s nightmares, but meanwhile the cop from the opening scene tirelessly works to pick up her trail. David Lyons is great as the crusading detective, consumed by an almost unnatural passion to find Katie and bring her in. He, too, has secrets.

Going into more of the plot would be a disservice. Despite the straightforward nature of the storyline, there are a number of clever twists and it takes a while for all the characters’ backstories to play out. Seeing the numerous plot threads unravel at their own pace and savoring the unexpected turns is a big part of what makes SAFE HAVEN more than your usual romance.

SAFE HAVEN is a terrific date movie. It is first and foremost a love story, but the film treats the subject with more respect than your typical teenage drama. The characters are mostly adults and the themes they must wrestle with are serious ones with no easy answers. In the end, the story affirms the value of trust, home, and family, and that those things are worth fighting for even if it means facing up to your worst fear.