

The Gripping Saga of the Search for a Missing Family

# Vanished In The Mountains

One wrong turn down an abandoned, snow-covered roadway leads to a massive search operation

Six years ago the story of a family that vanished during a blizzard made national news and captured the hearts of everyday Americans. A father, mother and their two young children had disappeared without a trace. Millions held their breath while hundreds of rescue workers combed the snow-covered mountains of southwest Oregon, an area notorious for black bears. Time and brutal winter weather were playing against them. Would they find the missing family in time?

*Aryeh Cohen*



James Kim, 35, was a successful journalist for a leading technology news show. His wife was a manager at two businesses in San Francisco. The happy couple had two young girls, aged four years and seven months, and was living the American dream—until the events of our story.

It all began on November 17, 2006, when the Kim family (James, Kati, and their two daughters, Penelope and Sabine) embarked on a well-deserved Thanksgiving Day vacation that would take them crisscrossing the American Northwest. First they drove north to Seattle, Washington, where they spent a few days with family. From there they headed south to Portland, Oregon, to visit relatives. They enjoyed a few days in each city before setting out to the Tu Tu Tun Lodge, a resort located outside the city of Gold Beach, Oregon. Here they would spend the last days of their vacation before returning home.

The trip from Portland to Gold Beach covers almost 300 miles, an estimated five hour drive. The Kims intended to start out early, but got off a late start. If everything went as scheduled they would reach the Tu Tu Tun Lodge by midnight.

On their way, Mrs. Kim called the lodge to find out if there was a vacancy. The receptionist said there was but urged Mrs. Kim to rethink her plans. Given the late hour and the weather forecast, it would be far more advisable to find a hotel along the way to spend the night, she told her. Then they would be able to continue their trip and arrive refreshed the following morning.

The Kims, however, decided to continue as planned.

They stopped in a restaurant along the highway for a family meal. Then they returned to the car and headed down highway I-5. Not long after leaving Portland, the Kims made the first in a series of fateful mistakes. To reach Gold Beach they needed to leave the I-5 at Exit 119.

However, they drove past the exit and failed to discover the error until about half an hour later.

The simplest thing to do now was make a U-turn and drive back to the missed exit. However, since it was already getting late, the Kims looked for a faster solution. They did not have a GPS, so they took out a map and studied it. Mrs. Kim was delighted to discover a shortcut. They would continue until Exit 61 at Merlin. There they could connect to Bear Camp Road, which cut through a vast forest and led directly to Gold Beach.

## Road to Nowhere

Unbeknown to the Kims, Bear Camp Road was little more than a deserted side road. Meandering 70 miles over the peaks and valleys of the Klamath Mountains, covered by a thick canopy of trees, it is full of sudden twists and surprise turns. Used primarily by hunters or campers looking to enjoy an outing on one of the many mountain lakes, experienced locals know to avoid it during the winter months when it easily becomes blocked with snowdrifts. The road is simply too remote to even be plowed.

However, to out-of-town motorists like the Kims, Bear Camp Road appears on the map as a regular route, and even a shortcut to Oregon's coastline. The beginning of the road looks more or less like any other road in the mountains. And, in the darkness, the sign at the entrance of Bear Camp Road



James Kim, a successful technology journalist.

warning that the route is dangerous in the winter is easy to miss.

Apparently, James Kim missed it.

As he turned down Bear Camp Road, Mrs. Kim decided to close her eyes. She thought that by the time she opened them they would be at or near their destination, the lodge. Meanwhile, James continued down the lonely, dark and increasingly treacherous road.

Bear Camp Road reaches 4,500 feet above sea level, and as James drove on, the road not only meandered but inclined. Then a heavy snow began to fall. It became increasingly difficult for him to see. He reached a fork in the road—and decided to veer right. In fact, he had just turned *off* Bear Camp Road, missing the small sign pointing ahead to continue to Gold Beach.

Now, the Kims were on an even more remote path – Logger's Road. As the name implies, it was used mainly by logging companies – and only during the summer. During the winter the road is gated shut.

Or was supposed to be gated shut.

Sadly, on this night, the gate was open. Later, media outlets would report that vandals had cut a lock on the gate, but a subsequent investigation suggested that it had intentionally been left open to avoid trapping local hunters and others who might have ventured past it.

Either way, The Kim family was now on a remote side path of an untraveled road that led literally to... nowhere.

## Lost in the Forest

James Kim continued driving while his wife and children slept. As far as he knew, they were getting closer and closer to Gold Beach.

After about an hour, Mrs. Kim awoke to find herself not at their destination but on a rough mountain road in the midst of a storm with the car creeping slowly along.

"This doesn't look right," she told her husband. "This can't be the road on the map. Did we miss a turn?"

"Don't think so," James answered her.



Oregon's scenic Klamath Mountains.



Bear Camp Road with its one lane and sudden, sharp turns.



Kim failed to notice the warning signs at the entrance to the road.

The situation was getting a little strange and scary. In the deepening darkness, it was slowly dawning on the Kims how serious their situation had become. Mrs. Kim realized that now was an appropriate time to call 911. Hopefully, a dispatcher would help them find their way out. However, when she looked at her cell phone, there was no signal. In the dense forest, they were out of range of a cell tower.