

Chapter 1
Becoming a Lamanite
“The Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.”
—Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 5:21

I cannot remember a time in my life when I was not told that I was a Lamanite.

I don't know when I first heard the word. It feels like it was always there, woven into the background of my childhood.

It was spoken so casually that it never sounded strange to the people saying it. It showed up in lessons, talks, classrooms, and sometimes even in jokes. No one stopped to explain it, because it was treated like a simple fact, the same way someone might say a person had blue eyes or brown hair.

You're a Lamanite.

As a Native girl growing up in the Mormon Church, I learned that this word was supposed to tell me who I was, where I came from, and why my life mattered in God's plan.

I didn't question it.

I didn't even know I could.

More than anything, I wanted to belong.

Somewhere.

Anywhere.

Church was supposed to be that place. It was where families were together, where people talked about love, kindness, and doing what was right. It was where I was told I was part of something important.

But even as a little girl, I knew I didn't fit the picture I saw around me.

I was taller than most of the other kids.

My skin was darker.

My last name didn't sound like theirs.

And my family didn't look like the perfect Mormon families sitting in the pews every Sunday.

I don't remember a time when I didn't feel connected to the Creator. Long before I understood doctrine or scripture, prayer felt natural to me.

If someone was hurt, I prayed.

If something was lost, I prayed.

If something bad happened, I prayed.

And when I wasn't praying, I was singing.

Primary songs played in my head constantly. I sang them in the car, in my room, sometimes loud enough to drive everyone around me crazy. Those songs were meant to teach us the gospel in a way children could understand.

Most of the time, I believed every word.

But one song never left me.

“Book of Mormon Stories.”

We learned hand motions to go with it, acting out the story of the Lamanites crossing the ocean, building cities, becoming a great people. All the kids stood, singing and moving our arms the way the teacher showed us.

Including using our fingers for feathers.

I remember feeling uncomfortable doing those motions, even though I couldn't explain why. I just knew I didn't want anyone to look at me while we sang about Lamanites, though part of me still tried to be okay with it.

I already felt different enough.

Church was not always a safe place for me, even though I was told it was supposed to be. Other kids teased me more than I liked to admit. At the time, we didn't call it bullying. It was just "kids being kids," or at least that's what I was told.

My mom would say, "Kill them with kindness. Thank them for the compliment."

Sometimes I tried.

Sometimes I ignored it.

Sometimes I didn't.

I had a temper. And when I felt pushed too far, I pushed back. I didn't want to be the kid who just stood there and took it. I wanted to fit in, but I wasn't willing to disappear to make that happen.

Whenever I got angry, at church or at home, someone would say the same thing:

Stop acting like Laman and Lemuel.

Stop murmuring.

Stop complaining.

Be more like Nephi.

"I will go and do as the Lord hath commanded."

I heard that scripture so many times growing up that it felt like it followed me everywhere.

The message was always the same.

Nephi was faithful.

Laman and Lemuel were rebellious.

Nephi obeyed.

Laman and Lemuel complained.

And somehow, without anyone saying it directly, I felt like I was being reminded which side of the story I was supposed to be on.

At the same time, I was told I should feel proud to be a Lamanite.

According to the story I grew up hearing, the Lamanites were a chosen people of God who had come to the Americas long ago to raise up a mighty nation. In church lessons and family conversations, these people were said to be the ancestors of Native Americans.

Sometimes the definition stretched even further, expanding to include Indigenous peoples across the Americas and even Polynesia.

The story was always presented as history.

And its source was the Book of Mormon.

Growing up, I understood that my brown skin meant something inside that story. It marked me as part of that lineage. I was reminded often that because I was a Lamanite, I needed to be strong, faithful, and an example.

But there was another part of the story, one that lived quietly beside that one.

We were not just described as chosen.

We were also described as fallen.

The same lessons that spoke about a chosen people also explained that the Lamanites had turned away from God long ago. Because of their disobedience, they had been cursed, scattered, and lost.

As a child, I absorbed both ideas at the same time, without understanding how contradictory they were.

We were special.

But we were also broken.

We were chosen.

But we had fallen.

Sometimes, when I heard stories in church, they sounded faintly familiar, like echoes of the histories my tribe carried. Stories about our ancestors, our land, and the people who had lived there long before anyone arrived to explain who we were supposed to be.

But the details never quite matched.

The places were different.

The people were different.

The meaning felt shifted, like someone had taken pieces of Indigenous stories and rearranged them to fit a different ending.

At the time, I didn't have the language to question it.

I only knew that the identity I had been given, the identity of a Lamanite, came with a story that was supposed to explain who I was and where my people came from.

It would take many years before I asked a question no one around me seemed to be asking:

Was that story ever really ours to begin with?