

# InSTYLE

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Michele  
**LOCKE**  
*The Power of Red*

Photography  
by Troy Jensen

# Michele LOCKE

## The Power of Red

### How lawyer Michele Locke turned red lipstick into a declaration of power

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Red has never been subtle. Throughout history, it has signaled love and danger, seduction and revolution. It demands attention and never apologizes. For Michele Locke, a Texas-based lawyer and former judge, red is not an aesthetic choice. It's a statement. Her red lipstick serves as both presence and authority, allowing her to claim space in courtrooms long defined by masculinity and control. "It really embodies femininity, sexuality, and power," she says. "It's the trifecta."

Locke learned early that courtroom presence is rarely neutral, especially for women. More than two decades into her career, she is still often underestimated the moment she walks in. "I walk into court with my red lipstick, dressed nicely, maybe a little bling," she says. "They always underestimate me, which works to my benefit." She learned to let that miscalculation work in her favor. "One of the lines that I always use is, 'you know, I'm just an attorney — maybe

you can explain it to me,'" she says with a smile. "They fall for it every single time."

That pattern began early. When she was 25 and newly sworn in, Locke entered courtrooms where her authority was routinely misread. Judges asked when her attorney would arrive, while fellow lawyers assumed she worked for probation. Even clients questioned her appointment, uneasy about a lawyer who was young and unapologetically polished. "They definitely discount you," she says. The misjudgments only deepened when she was visibly pregnant, during an incident where a male attorney asked her to sit on his lap.

The message was clear: Femininity was something to be minimized, not wielded, much less celebrated. Locke chose otherwise. "If you go in dressed up and pretty, especially with red lipstick on, the men in particular underestimate you," she says. "But once some of the attorneys have gone against me, they don't ever underestimate me again."



Locke's sense of purpose took shape long before her career began. A child of divorce, she knew early that the law would be her path. "I really wanted to be a lawyer from age eight on," she recalls. That clarity was sharpened by her experience emigrating from Canada to the United States, when her family moved south amid a wave of physicians drawn to underserved border communities. Despite her father's profession, the process offered no shortcuts.

"I sat at the immigration office with everyone else," says Locke. "Nothing comes easy. You have to work for it. Nothing's given to you." That conviction cemented her belief in hard work and equality, and would later guide her when she became a judge at 31. "And I believe at a very fundamental level that we all bleed red. I don't care who you are, what you do, or where you come from. When you walk into that courtroom, we're all on equal footing," she says. "Everyone's treated the same. That's what our system was founded on. That's what it should be."

Locke's time on the bench was not easy. She spent years listening to stories of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and addiction. "For five years, I heard every single day, 'He hit me. He punched me. He choked me,'" says Locke. In child protection court, she saw horrible things. Over time, it all caught up with her. "You become desensitized," she says. "You think everyone's an abuser. You think everyone's a victim. And then you become hopeless, because how do we stop it all?"

Eventually, her body forced the reckoning her mind resisted. Over a span of just five years, she underwent 15 surgeries, including spinal fusions and joint replacements. Her weight climbed to nearly 300 pounds, adding strain to a body already carrying too much. But the physical collapse did not happen in isolation. "You throw in a completely unhealthy, toxic marriage, and that's a recipe for disaster," says Locke. "I don't know if, had I stayed married, I'd still be standing here today," she says. "My health was fading that quickly."







Surviving it all sharpened her perspective. "You don't get extra years at the pearly gates because you had 15 surgeries in five years," says Locke. "You don't. So you've got to make the best of it." With "nowhere to go but up," she set about reclaiming herself. Not about perfection, but presence.

Red had always pulled at her, long before it became a signature. It showed up first in the color of her hair, in sweaters and turtlenecks. The lipstick came later. "It takes a lot of *oomph* to wear power red," she says. "Not everyone can handle putting it on, because some people will say it's too bold or *too* red; there are so many excuses, but there's a shade of red for every woman out there." Locke's shade is Chanel Rouge Allure 104 Passion, a vibrant, classic red.

For Locke, a red lip is not situational. She wears it to court, especially on the first day of a jury trial, so they know "who's in charge," and it shows up just as easily on quiet Sunday mornings at the movies, when she's the only one there with a full face and nowhere to be. "It just makes me feel

good," she says. "It makes me feel confident, it makes me feel attractive. I mean, it just makes me feel like a f\*\*\*ing woman." The consistency is the point. Red is not armor she puts on for battle and removes afterward. It's a ritual — a way of showing up for herself, whether she's commanding a courtroom or sitting alone in the dark of a movie theater.

From that ritual comes a broader belief. "Each woman needs to find their sparkle," says Locke. "It doesn't have to be lipstick. It could be a scarf, a jacket, a pair of jeans, but when you put it on, you feel amazing. Just one day like that can change your outlook, change your demeanor, and give you hope again." In a world that asks women to soften themselves, Locke's advice is simple: Find what makes you feel powerful, and wear it without apology.

By Madeline Moretti