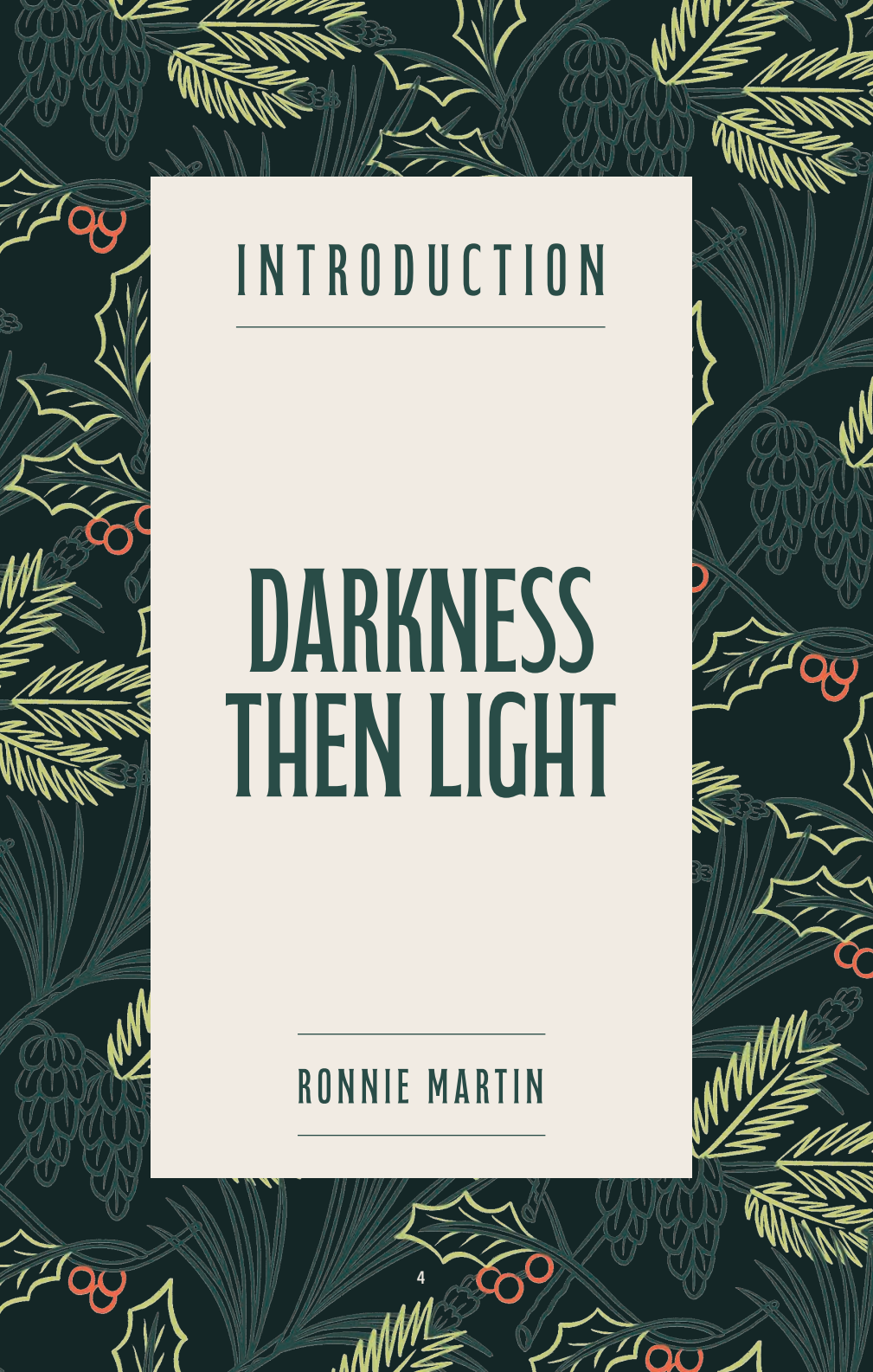




INTRODUCTION

DARKNESS THEN LIGHT

RONNIE MARTIN

Christmastime has arrived in all its luster, but I'm having one of those nights when sleeping has become a wild ambition. The cares of the world are weighing down on my soul, and the ticking hand of my analog clock has turned into a deafening roar. For me, it is better to simply admit defeat and abandon any hope of attaining some sweet slumber. I silently shuffle down the dim hallway, trying to keep my steps delicate as the Christmas tree finally comes into view from the corner of the room. I glance at the garland and lights, woven between the pine needles in suspended animation, still magically twinkling from the night before. Even in this depressingly early hour, it manages to bring a faint smile to my sleepy face.

Of course, this is predawn, when everything appears darker and quieter than at any other time of the day. I settle into a room we call the library and gaze through the glass window-pane as the first hints of light declare morning's arrival. Although my eyes are tired and dull, my mind happens to be as alert as ever. As I sit before the Lord in stillness, he provides me with a much-needed remembrance at Christmastime: My story is not always what it seems. It appears darker and quieter at



times. It feels lost in a forest of shadows and obscured images. What I'm learning is that these are the predawn moments of my life.

Advent has a way of reminding us of this dark but divine truth every year. During the dimmest hours of the night, we are moments away from the morning light—a light that never fails to arrive and welcome us into God's evergreen mercies.

The stories you are about to read contain vivid portraits of humanity, steeped in the aching depths of darkness and the vibrant births of new light—two realities that permeate and shape our existence. These are honest and revealing narratives from women and men that give testimony to the unveiling of Christ, whose arrival was like the brightest light piercing the bleakest darkness.

My hope is that as you reflect on these personal stories of darkness and light, you will be reminded of the predawn moments of your own life and rejoice in the light that never fails to arrive in hope and glory.

Christ is born!