

students he passed on his way down began whispering to each other as soon as he passed them.

He wasn't surprised to see Lavender and the Patil twins sat at the Gryffindor table when he arrived, the hall sparsely occupied otherwise. With portkeys to take instead of a train to catch, the students weren't as worried about being late.

He joined the girls at their section of the table, letting himself look as satisfied as he felt.

"So how was the party, then?" Parvati asked archly. Harry winked at her.

"I'm sure you've heard all about it already," he returned. The Indian girl grinned impishly.

"Hermione was *furious* when she got in last night," she confided. "I swear, Sophie had to hex her silent just so we could all get some sleep. Apparently you and your boyfriend looked far too smug and handsome at the party last night."

"Smug and handsome," Harry repeated, then chuckled. "That's him in a nutshell, yeah."

All three girls giggled — Harry knew the twins were pretending the information was as new to them as it was to Lavender, so their friend didn't feel left out.

"I can't believe you managed to keep that secret! I mean, I always thought there was a *spark* between you two but I was never sure if it was just a hate-attraction sort of thing. And then you became friends and I wasn't sure what to think!" Lavender said, running her fingers through her curls. "How long has that been going on?"

"How long do you think?" he retorted. She mock-scowled, hitting him lightly on the arm.

"Don't play with us, Harry," she pleaded. "Not after all we've done for you!"

"Not after all we *can* do for you, working damage control here while you're cosied up with your boy all Yule," Parvati added pointedly. "If we have the truth we know what to do with the more outrageous lies."

She had a point and they both knew it; if the rumours were left to their own devices, Merlin only knew what they might come back to after Christmas.

"Oh, alright then," he relented playfully. "Only because I can trust you."

"I bet it was this summer," Lavender cooed. "Once your godfather and his mum reconnected."

"Earlier," Harry told her, watching her eyes widen.

"*Really?* Sometime in fifth year? He did help us out when Umbridge found the HA room, I suppose... was it after that?"

He shook his head again. "Earlier."